Age of Settlement and Colonisation

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European Underdevelopment and the Imperative of Overseas Expansionism

The dramatic burst of European overseas expansion that began in the fifteenth century and peaked in the first century of the industrial era generated a profound and lasting Eurocentrism that has dominated historical explanations of the geopolitics and global cross-cultural exchanges of the last half-millennium. Eurocentric perspectives remain pervasive. They underwrite the early modern and modern labels we use for the periodisation of recent centuries in global history. And they have sustained a conceptual framework that encapsulates widely held convictions regarding the exceptional nature of the socioeconomic and political transformations that led to Europe’s rise to unprecedented affluence and global hegemony.¹ But research in recent decades has made it clear that Europe was but one of a number of highly dynamic, expansive core regions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.² In terms of its population, the extent of its urbanisation, the size of its armies, the productivity of its agriculture and other indices of socioeconomic and political development, Europe lagged well behind societies in China, the Islamic world and Mesoamerica. In short, Europe was an underdeveloped region. And the reports of European merchants, missionaries and other travellers to the Middle East and Asia devoted considerable time and attention to this fact. Their accounts, which by the late fifteenth century had begun to accumulate throughout

¹ Notions that persist in both academic scholarship and popular attitudes to the present day. For prominent, recent exemplars of the former, see David S. Landes, The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are So Wealthy and Some So Poor (New York, 1998); and E.L. Jones, The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia (Cambridge, 1981).

² These are surveyed in rather different ways in David Ringrose, Expansion and Global Interaction, 1200–1700 (New York, 2001); and John Darwin, After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400–2000 (Harmondsworth, 2008).
Europe, did much to arouse the fears and needs that were among the forces driving early European overseas projects.³

The geographic expanse and diversity of cultures conquered by several non-western empires were often a match for those of the Iberian vanguard, despite the much greater global reach of Spanish conquistadores and Portuguese fidalgos. Between the second half of the fifteenth century and the end of the sixteenth, Muscovy on the eastern fringes of Europe expanded deep into Central Asia and towards the Pacific Ocean and the borderlands of China. In roughly the same century and a half, the Ottoman Turks extended their imperial sway over the Balkans, portions of central Europe, North Africa, and the Arab heartlands in the eastern Mediterranean. Rival Muslim dynasties built smaller gunpowder empires. The Safavid domain was centred on the Iranian plateau and hemmed in by the Ottomans in the west and by the Mughals in the east who, from their base in north-central India, had conquered all but the southern cone of the South Asian subcontinent by the end of the sixteenth century.

By 1400, the African Sahel was home to a number of powerful and growing land-bound empires. In the fourteenth century Islam had spread to this region and was widely adopted by rulers of the Sudanic kingdoms. The rulers and merchants of the empire of Mali, whose power was already underwritten by its strategic location between the gold fields to the south and the Saharan salt deposits to the north, found in the Islamic religion diplomatic and commercial links to trade networks that spanned much of the known world. Cities such as Timbuktu were key centres of exchange. Based in the fertile lands of the Niger River basin, Mali projected its power – albeit tenuously – all the way to present-day Gambia on the West African coast. When Mali declined in the latter half of the fifteenth century, several other trade-oriented, urban-based polities, including Songhai and the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu, emerged to take its place.⁴

In roughly the same period as these Sudanic empires flourished, the Aztecs and Incas were establishing the largest, wealthiest and most centrally administered polities that had ever arisen in the Americas. The heart of the Aztec Empire was the island city of Tenochtitlan in the valley of Mexico, which had steadily extended its influence over a cluster of tributary states that had reached the rainforest remnants of the Maya kingdoms by the time of the Spanish invasion in 1519. The Inca Empire, which was more centralised and better integrated than the Aztec, expanded from a nucleus around Cuzco in present-day Peru across the length of the Andes mountains and beyond from contemporary Colombia well into northern Chile. Both societies practised intensive agriculture. But, facilitated by an extensive network of roads and way stations, Inca authority extended more broadly up and down the Andes. This in turn allowed the Incas, much more than the Aztecs, to

coordinate the circulation of crops and trade goods throughout their realm. The Aztecs, relying on a military hierarchy and incessant warfare, focused their control on the richest markets of the central valley, which were located in and around the lake region that was dominated by Tenochtitlan.\(^5\)

Only one of the great empires that the Europeans encountered in the first phase of exploration and colonisation could rival their capacity to harness sea power.\(^6\) The early rulers of the Ming dynasty, which had wrested control of China from the Mongols in the late fourteenth century, had invested heavily in massive war and commercial ships and launched a series of impressive naval expeditions that had traversed most of the vast Indian Ocean trading network between 1405 and 1433.\(^7\) But the Ming voyages led neither to the establishment of an overseas trading network nor to settlement colonies, and by the mid-fifteenth century the Chinese navy was much reduced in size and confined mainly to patrolling the coasts of China. The Ming retreat from the sea was paralleled by the end of sustained efforts to control the nomadic peoples of inner Asia, and growing restrictions on trading contacts with both China’s Japanese and Korean neighbours as well as merchant and missionary intruders from the far west of Eurasia. Though Chinese war fleets proved able to hold their own against their Portuguese counterparts in the early 1500s, the Ming dynasty’s abandonment of attempts to project its power and influence by sea left no Asian rival that was capable of countering the Portuguese resort to force and extortion when they found that they had little to exchange in the peaceful commerce that had dominated the Indian Ocean trading system for millennia.

Advances in sailing ships proved to be only one of a number of key advantages the Europeans possessed in their efforts to break out by sea from the Muslim encirclement that had for centuries menaced Christendom from North Africa to Asia Minor. Though it has become fashionable to dispute or play down the ways in which Europe’s political, socioeconomic and cultural development diverged significantly from other colonising societies,\(^8\) the macro-approach which seeks

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\(^5\) For a thorough discussion of the history of development of both of these major pre-Columbian civilisations, see Friedrich Katz, *Ancient American Civilizations* (New York, 1972).

\(^6\) Even though the Ottomans had a very large navy, their galleys were unsuitable for extended voyages on the high seas and lacked the cannon that the Portuguese used to good effect in battles, such as that against a combined Ottoman–Indian fleet off the port of Diu in 1507, to establish their hegemony in the Indian Ocean.

\(^7\) The most readable and comprehensive account of these remarkable achievements is Edward Dreyer’s *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433* (New York, 2007).

\(^8\) For differing perspectives on what has in effect become a debate over the extent to which Europe’s historical trajectory from the early modern centuries onward has been exceptional, see Landes and Jones for the most extreme formulations affirming of this position. For those who seek to contest it, see Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: The Silver Age in Asia and the World Economy* (Berkeley, CA, 1998) and Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), who argue that Europe’s achievements were either matched (Pomeranz) or
to tally up the strengths and weaknesses of whole culture areas (Europe, China, Sudanic Africa, and so on) or empires (for example, the Ottoman or Inca) is at best misdirected. As we have suggested, in the fifteenth century western Europe was at parity with, or lagged behind, other societies and empires in key sectors of societal development. But as recent research and ongoing debates have shown, the level of development of whole societies is very difficult to measure with any precision. Rather than an overall advantage relative to other expansive empires, the Europeans’ ability to engage in diverse overseas enterprises hinged on the interplay among a select and often quite specific cluster of innovations and endeavours in which it had forged ahead of most or all of its potential global rivals. European expansionism was also facilitated by factors – such as its geographical position and resource endowment – over which its inhabitants had little control, but which would again and again prove critical to the success of its overseas endeavours.

Because Europe was geophysically a collection of peninsulas on the far west of Eurasia, its geography, which also featured extensive and navigable river systems and ample harbours, had long favoured water-born travel and trade. The fact that the more developed western portions of the continent projected into the Atlantic and had ready access to the Baltic and Mediterranean served to enhance the Europeans’ maritime orientation. The initial overseas probes of the Portuguese and Spanish rivals were favoured by the winds and currents off the Iberian Peninsula as well as the fact that they could draw on instruments, maps, navigation techniques, ship designs and sailors from both the north Atlantic and Mediterranean. Millennia of contacts across the Mediterranean Sea, which the spread of Islam often enhanced rather than disrupted, also meant that the Italians and Iberians in particular were aware of, and able to adopt, key elements of the seafaring traditions of non-European societies, most critically the Arabs’ fine maps and navigational instruments, and the lateen sails and narrow hulls of their highly navigable dhows. The steady growth of water-born transport and the challenges of deep-sea fishing also meant that Europe had disproportionate numbers of sailors and skilled navigators relative to its population, which was smaller than that of most of the expansive empires that would soon be encountered overseas. Early explorers, traders and adventurers could also draw on time-tested skills in shipbuilding and instrument-making. And from ancient times in the Mediterranean and in the centuries of Viking raids from the Baltic Sea to Sicily from the eighth to eleventh centuries CE, the sea had been a major arena for intra-continental warfare. The growing deployment of handguns, and later small cannon in combat at sea, coincided with the very centuries when the Portuguese mounted their successive expeditions into the Atlantic and down the coast of Africa. This convergence made possible the development of the

exceeded by (Frank) those attained by the Chinese. For thoughtful assessments of the arguments on each side, see the essays by Joseph M. Bryant, especially ‘The West and the Rest Revisited: Debating Capitalist Origins, European Colonialism, and the Advent of Modernity’, Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers canadiens de sociologie 31/4 (2006): pp. 403–444.

9 For an elaboration on this notion, see Darwin, After Tamerlane, pp. 95–6.
superb caravels, which in their combination of seaworthiness, manoeuvrability and firepower – if not in size – had no match anywhere in the world from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth century.  

Innovations in the design and construction of armed, long-distance sailing ships provided the most decisive technological advantage Europeans were able to deploy as they ventured overseas. But a number of late medieval and early modern improvements in agrarian production, machines, commercial transactions and instrumentation proved critical to their ability to increase domestic productivity and labour efficiency, and to integrate the bullion, handicraft goods and foodstuffs imported from Asia, Africa and the Americas into a steadily growing continental economy. The introduction of the horse collar, iron ploughs capable of turning the heavy north European soils, long field cultivation and crop rotation raised agrarian productivity – though still not to the levels per hectare achieved by Asian wet-rice cultivators. They also facilitated the introduction of new foods from the Americas, particularly beans, maize and potatoes, into the European diet.  

In the centuries before the age of expansion, wind and water mills greatly enhanced the non-animate power available to millers and metal workers as well as to the Dutch and other peoples who sought to reclaim new agricultural lands from the sea. Increasingly sophisticated combinations of gears, cogs and trip-hammers ground grain, worked metals and inflated bellows. According to one estimate, by 1500 Europe as a whole enjoyed a 5:1 advantage in the ability to extract energy from animal and machine power over China, which had been the world leader in technological innovation and transfer for millennia.  

Although few observers recognised it at the time, Iberian empire builders and their north European successors possessed a range of colonising options that exceeded those of any of their expansionist rivals. Would-be European empire builders could refer to a range of classical and medieval precedents in organising their overseas enterprises. Greek, Roman and, more recently, Islamic empires and Italian city states had generated and refined several time-tested modes of expansion and colonisation that, although historically intertwined, were fundamentally distinct. Urban-based tribute systems, export-oriented plantation enclaves, trade diasporas, trading post empires and settlement colonies provided a broad repertoire of models for colonisation.  


13 A thoughtful and thorough exploration of these early Mediterranean models for expansion and domination is central to Ben Kiernan’s *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, CT, 2007), especially...
Roman imperial expansion and colonisation depended on the creation of urban centres to exploit the neighbouring hinterland and its inhabitants. Tribute arrangements with local populations, which involved a combination of agricultural products and labour, formed the basis of the Roman presence. An even more widely deployed institution for extracting agricultural products and organising a labour force was the plantation enclave. These export-oriented, large-scale, labour- and capital-intensive sources of commercial produce became a persisting feature of European history from the time of the Crusades. Although both the consumption of sugar (the premier plantation crop) and its intensive cultivation were Indian in origin and disseminated to the Mediterranean by the Arabs, Italian families with financial backing from German and Iberian moneylenders spearheaded the growth and development of plantation-based sugar cultivation, which spread across the Mediterranean to Iberia and into the Atlantic between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁴

Long before the Iberians made their way overseas, trade diasporas, or networks of interconnected merchant communities and their agents, were found across most of the Americas and Eurasia.¹⁵ Traders from diverse regions migrated over land and the oceans to establish new operations in receptive foreign societies. Concentrated in urban settlements and linked by religious, kinship and ethnic ties, the primary purpose of these expatriate merchant communities was to forge links with local traders and producers in host societies, and establish or maintain inter-cultural exchanges in exotic cultivars, manufactures and other items that might prove to be mutually profitable. Trade diasporas often became important channels for cross-cultural contact in other ways as well, such as the transfer of religious ideas, technologies and pathogens. From the Silk Road and the far-flung Indian Ocean system to the African Sahel and rainforests of Mesoamerica, these diasporas had been a key component of cross-cultural interaction and exchange since ancient times. The seaborne trading networks forged by the Venetians and the Genoese provided the expansionist commercial models with which the Iberians, and later the northern Europeans, would first experiment with as they ventured across the Atlantic and into the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ A kindred mode of expansionism, also inspired by the example of the Venetians and Genoese, was the trading-post empire. These networks consisted of centrally controlled but widely dispersed trading settlements that were often fortified and dominated by ‘factories’ or warehouses for the storage of local products to be exported, and imported goods

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16 French and Belgian historians of the Annales School crafted the pioneering accounts of these influences. See, especially, Chaunu, L’expansion Européenne, part 2, chap. 2, III and IV, and part 3, chap. 2, IV; and Verlinden, Beginnings of Modern Colonization, part 1, chap. 1 and part 2.
to be offered in exchange. Forts and heavily armed ships deployed to control high-priced commodities, particularly spices in the first centuries of Iberian expansion, enabled small numbers of Portuguese to build an ‘empire’ in the Indian Ocean with stunning rapidity in the early decades of the sixteenth century.

The most immediate precedent for settler colonies was that forged during the seven centuries of the Spanish Reconquista. The competition between Christian and Muslim forces for control of the Iberian peninsula had at times depopulated whole towns and villages. Sparsely settled territory yielded little in the way of rent or agricultural produce, and was notoriously difficult to defend. As Christian leaders advanced southward, they needed Spanish peasants and herders to move into newly conquered lands to generate both surplus produce and, later, local conscripts for their armies. Several factors drew commoners to settle in these borderland regions. Spanish law provided mechanisms that allowed squatters in such situations to become landholders, which elevated their status among the local population. In return for protection in these frontier areas by lesser noblemen, the peasant migrants exchanged labour and produce.

In a carefully researched analysis, one historian has recently argued that Spain, Portugal, England, France and the Netherlands deployed distinctive and culturally rooted rituals to signify their possession of, and authority over, peoples and lands in the Americas. And certainly early modern imperial strategists and overseas colonisers operated within a framework inflected by culture. But the interplay between local circumstances and the immediate concerns of indigenous and European agents, more than particular historical experiences and precise cultural differences, determined the form and substance of individual colonial projects, and thus better explain the divergent manifestations of empire.

The most important local variables in determining European mode(s) of colonisation included the existence, size and degree of political unity of the

17 Angus McKay, *Spain in the Middle Ages: From Frontier to Empire, 1000–1500* (New York, 1977); Anthony M. Stevens Arroyo, ‘The Inter-Atlantic Paradigm: The Failure of Spanish Medieval Colonization of the Canary and Caribbean Islands’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35/3 (1993): pp. 515–43; Miguel Angel Ladero Quesada, ‘Spain, circa 1492: Social Values and Structures’, in Stuart B. Schwartz (ed.), *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (New York, 1994), pp. 96–133. In situations where repopulation proved difficult, the region was left to armed Christian raiders who sought to extract tribute from – or to plunder – local Muslim communities. The famed eleventh-century leader Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar – ‘El Cid’ – was one such figure. But the popularity of his and similar stories, combined with the subsequent and systematic repression of Muslims and Jews in the fifteenth century, tends to obscure the earlier settlement aspect of the Reconquista.


indigenous population, the nature of the local economy, the extent of bureaucratic centralisation, and the effectiveness of local military forces. But perhaps the most pivotal factors were the nature of the local climate, the environment and the virulence of prevalent diseases. Europeans shared with their distant neighbours in the densely populated regions of the Middle East, Central Asia, China, India and Africa recurring exposure to such Old World diseases as the plague and smallpox. But the distinctive disease environments of Africa’s Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts, as well as the tropical regions of the Indian subcontinent and much of Southeast Asia, meant that death resulting from dysentery, yellow fever, malaria and other maladies was a regular occurrence for newly arrived Europeans that limited their colonising options in those regions. In a disease environment free of pathogens lethal to the Europeans, and where climate and soil conditions were conducive to animal husbandry and the cultivation of crops (including those for export) familiar to Europeans, overland expansion and large-scale permanent settlement became more tenable.20

Phase I (c. 1350–1580): Conquest, Trading Empires and the Beginnings of Settlement

European overseas expansion began in the waters that stretched from the Straits of Gibraltar west to the Azores and south to the Canary Islands. Much of this region was steeped in European mythology – the Canaries as exotic isles known to the ancients and the West African littoral as a land laden with gold. The Azores and Madeira were entirely unknown to Europeans. Expansion and colonisation therefore began in unfamiliar settings and were characterised by experimentation and improvisation. The same would apply to Asia and the Americas; they too were either steeped in mythology or entirely unknown and demanded a great deal of improvisation by the first groups of European colonisers. What occurred in this small region of the Atlantic – in the development of administrative institutions, economic relationships and cross-cultural interaction – would prove to be a microcosm of the dynamics that characterised European expansion more generally from the fourteenth to the late sixteenth century.21

Madeira and the Azores were uninhabited when the Portuguese began colonising them in the early fifteenth century. With rich soils, no indigenous resistance and Italian financial backing, Iberian colonists soon experimented with two prominent European cultivars. Wheat and sugar competed for land and the labour of poor migrants and slaves who arrived either from Iberia or directly from West Africa. Portugal was a reliable market for wheat, since its frequent low crop yields forced

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21 Useful guides to the major issues include Verlinden, The Beginnings of Modern Colonization; and Schwartz (ed.), Implicit Understandings.
it to buy from foreign markets. Sugar had proved a lucrative cash crop in markets throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. Under the auspices of Prince Henry, Portuguese settlers first arrived on the islands in the 1420s, some with titles to land, others merely to till it. Though the variable climate of the Azores made them less suited to sugar cultivation, on Madeira despite its mountainous interior, plantations worked by a mixed labour force (slave and free) had spread across the island by the 1450s. Madeira was thus transformed into a sugar monoculture that dominated the European and Mediterranean markets before its precipitous decline in the early 1500s.

By contrast, the colonisation of the Canary Islands was far more varied and complex. These islands were home to peoples who shared cultural ties with the Berbers of mainland North Africa, and their diverse societies were built on a combination of pastoralism and sedentary agriculture. The Canary islanders did not practise metallurgy and did not build watercraft; they neither maintained contact with the mainland nor journeyed between the islands. As a result, they lacked immunity to mainland pathogens and were ill equipped to prevent European encroachment. Two of the largest islands, Tenerife and Grand Canary, contained the best soils and supported the largest and most highly structured societies. These became the focus of Franciscan missionary activity in 1351, when a string of European trading posts was established on the islands. When Jean de Béthencourt and Gadifer de La Salle began a period of seigniorial conquest of the more peripheral islands fifty years later, these earlier commercial and religious contacts helped them forge alliances with indigenous leaders. The noblemen’s efforts brought only the most limited territorial control or local authority, but such alliances proved useful when in the late fifteenth century a unified Spain sought more thorough consolidation of royal power and territorial control on Grand Canary, La Palma and Tenerife. Plantations were established in the Canaries by the end of the century. As in Madeira, they depended upon a mixed labour force, which included Portuguese and Spanish immigrants, to grow the sugarcane and operate the mills. Slaves from Africa and Iberia (often moriscos, Muslim converts to Christianity) and those captured in the Canaries themselves provided most of the labour.

Iberian undertakings in the Atlantic also included the coast of Africa, where they were lured by the longstanding belief that rich gold fields lay just beyond the coast. The Portuguese launched a series of exploratory probes of the trade-and-

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22 Peter Russell provides a thorough discussion of the role of Prince Henry, the Portuguese Duke of Viseu, in the process of Iberian expansion in *Prince Henry ‘the Navigator’: A Life* (New Haven, CT, 2000).


raid variety, and were able to procure small numbers of slaves in this fashion. But initial clashes demonstrated that West African *pirogues* (water craft) outmatched Portuguese caravels on the calm estuaries that might otherwise have allowed the Portuguese greater access to the interior. All along Africa’s Atlantic coast, the Portuguese were forced to consent to formal trade agreements with local leaders if they wanted reliable access to the gold and slave markets of the interior. Here, as in the Canaries, trade pacts almost invariably embroiled the Portuguese in domestic politics. But, unlike the Canaries, they were confronted with fiercely inhospitable disease environments and large, stratified and well-organised indigenous societies. These peoples possessed a range of immunities that surpassed those of the Europeans in the tropical disease environment of the African littoral. Moreover, these West African kingdoms were themselves already engaged in territorial conquest and were home to large contingents of experienced warriors backed by communities which were readily mobilised for combat. Trade-and-raid tactics quickly gave way to formal diplomatic relations between the kingdoms of Portugal and the Kongo, as well as the creation of an African Catholic Church in 1491. These connections facilitated Portugal’s overland expansion in west Central Africa. But rulers in the Kongo were careful to curtail the power and influence of Portugal’s secular and ecclesiastical officials. All along Africa’s Atlantic littoral, the Portuguese were generally confined to their coastal trading posts. And here, coastal Africa’s distinctive disease environment, more lethal than any Europeans had previously encountered, rendered their presence even more tenuous. This was an arrangement that persisted for nearly four centuries: the rate of survival – so often aided by contacts with local peoples – was sufficient to sustain forts and factories, but even when the Portuguese, Dutch, French or English achieved some degree of authority along the coast, their control weakened in proportion to the distance they travelled inland.25

Both of the Iberian powers moved beyond this initial zone of expansion in the late fifteenth century with the objective of establishing direct connections to the Asian sources of the lucrative spice trade. By 1498 the Portuguese had succeeded in finding a sea route linking them to the Indian Ocean trading network, where they sought in the first decades of the sixteenth century to establish a trading-post empire. But here again the strength of local rulers and the effectiveness of their military forces, combined with immunological factors, put more ambitious colonising efforts out of reach. Goa, the capital of Portugal’s trading-post empire in the Indian Ocean, provides a superb illustration of these limitations. It was both the heart of Portuguese imperial power and the base from which it sought to dominate

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the Asian trade in pepper and cinnamon. But Goa was always hemmed in by the more powerful Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara to its east and by expansive Muslim sultanates of the Deccan to its north. Using force, the Portuguese could piece together a trading empire in the Indian Ocean but little more. Their partial monopoly of the spice trade and broader, peaceful participation in the long-established Asian trade system generated enough wealth that, for a few decades at least, there was little incentive to expand Portuguese activities in Brazil, even though expansion there was a possibility.26

The Portuguese did manage to gain control over an existing tribute system for cinnamon production and export that had long been a major source of revenue for the rulers of the Kotte kingdom, founded centuries earlier in the tropical rainforest regions of southwest Ceylon. After seizing power from the Kotte rulers, the Portuguese compelled the chalias, a caste that had traditionally harvested the bark from the cinnamon trees, to meet compulsory quotas and transport the cinnamon to special warehouses in Colombo on the western coast of the island. The peelers and carters continued to live in the village communities that their forebears had inhabited under Sinhalese rulers. Their labours were monitored by Portuguese officials, and overseen by several layers of Sinhalese notables who staffed the lower rungs of the special government department charged with enforcing the government’s monopoly control over the groves of cinnamon trees, and the harvest and export of the spice. Whether in bark or ground form, the bulk of the crop, which was the highest quality cinnamon then available, was exported to Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.27

At roughly the same time that the Portuguese landed in India, the Spanish moved into the Caribbean. Early contacts with the Taíno peoples on Hispaniola gave way to tentative trade relations. But, unlike the Portuguese-Asian networks, these early Caribbean trade contacts were not sufficient to sustain the commercial ties desired by Iberian merchants and traders. Immunological factors, combined with the military strength of the Spanish, meant they could experiment with other options in their imperial arsenal. A settlement colony linked to placer gold mining and an embryonic plantation enclave grew up on Hispaniola. The potential for greater riches on the mainland soon drew the Spanish to Mesoamerica and the Andes, where once again immunological factors proved decisive.28 In Mesoamerica the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, fell to a coalition of Spanish and Amerindian


27 For the fullest description of the cinnamon tribute system in the Portuguese period, see Tikiri Abeyasinghe, Portuguese Rule in Ceylon (Colombo, 1964); for changes under the Dutch, see Sinnappah Arasaratnam, Dutch Power in Ceylon, 1658–87 (Amsterdam, 1958).

forces in 1521; just over a decade later the Spanish defeated the Incas as well. From Mexico to the Andes, European invaders introduced diseases to which the native peoples had no prior exposure. Scarlet fever, measles and – most lethally – smallpox were transmitted with catastrophic consequences for the native peoples. Losses may have reached as high as 90 per cent in heavily populated regions such as central and southern Mexico.\(^{29}\) The consequences were far ranging because disease did more than eliminate the Spaniards’ primary competitors for economic, political and military power. With fewer hands to till the fields, even the richest Amerindian lands remained only partly cultivated. As agricultural shortages grew, starvation compounded the loss to disease. Fertility plummeted, further stalling an indigenous recovery. The emptying of the countryside and the development of pastoral agriculture gave Europeans control of lands formerly inhabited by wealthy and powerful indigenous societies.\(^{30}\)

The Spanish presence in the Americas expanded steadily, if unevenly. Although colonisation was initially concentrated in centres of pre-Columbian civilisation – central Mexico and the Andes – by 1600, Spanish-dominated cities and towns could be found from north-central Mexico to Buenos Aires far to the south. Spain’s Charles I (and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V) strengthened royal authority on the mainland with the creation of viceroyalties in Mexico City, formerly Tenochtitlan, in 1535 and in the new city of Lima on Peru’s coastal plain in 1544. Colonisation also entailed the introduction of non-native plants and animals. Spanish settlements thrived as their plants and animals out-competed indigenous flora and fauna. The convergence of foreign plants, animals, pathogens and cultivation techniques transformed and often devastated the native ecology. Whole stretches of central Mexico were deforested, leading to the slow desiccation of the surrounding lands. The land itself would ultimately be conquered and colonised.\(^{31}\)

In roughly the same time period, but on the other side of the Atlantic, Ireland became a target for increased English and Welsh migration and settlement. The ‘Pale’ region west of Dublin along the Boyne and Liffey river valleys had begun to be occupied by Anglo-Norman invaders in the twelfth century. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, this bridgehead served as a base for the conquest of much of the island. Initially, the ‘old English’ community was augmented by discharged soldiers who chose to remain in Ireland. Over time, nobles and gentry, traders and artisans, clergymen, farmers and herders migrated to claim and settle what were viewed as scantily inhabited and poorly developed lands throughout much of the island. By one well-informed estimate, there were 100,000 English and


\(^{31}\) Melville, \textit{A Plague of Sheep}. 

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Welsh settlers in Ireland by the mid-seventeenth century, and the island was the wealthiest and most favoured settlement colony established by English migrants.\(^{32}\) In some areas the indigenous population, which was actually much denser and more highly developed than the invaders allowed, was displaced as English lords and settlers claimed large tracts of lands. Irish farmers frequently became tenants on English estates or the lands of local Irish notables who, through collaboration with the colonisers or by demonstrating that they had sufficient retainers and resources to forcibly resist displacement, managed to maintain possession of their ancestral holdings. Though some advocates of colonisation sought to establish crown authority and English legal precedents, and to assimilate the Irish elite, most settlers as well as officials and potential migrants in the British Isles viewed the Irish as barbaric and dangerous heathens.\(^{33}\)

**Phase II (c. 1580–1790): A Predominance of Plantation Enclaves and Settlement Colonies**

The Spanish conquests in the Americas and the fort and factory network of the Portuguese laid the foundations for the settlement colonies and the slave plantations that proved to be the main modes of European overseas expansion in the two centuries that followed. In the seventeenth century the Dutch and English vied for supremacy in the Indian Ocean, and fought for control of the lucrative spice trade that the Portuguese had struggled in vain to monopolise throughout the 1500s. Port cities and trading posts on both sides of the Atlantic were also key components of the slave plantation system. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the locus of European colonial political consolidation, society formation and economic enterprise shifted from coasts and sea lanes to overland frontiers in the Americas, southern Africa and central Asia as well as to the building or consolidation of formal empires in the Americas, and South and Southeast Asia. The strength and timing of the forward movement in each of these areas varied considerably, and in many cases the advance of settlers and the acquisition of territory were preceded by the infiltration of European transfrontier groups ranging from trappers, traders and explorers to missionaries and market-oriented pastoralists.

By 1540, Spain’s conquest and colonisation of indigenous peoples and their vast, fertile lands had expanded beyond the core areas of pre-Columbian settlement in central Mexico and the Andean highlands. And as they grew the


\(^{33}\) Nicholas Canny’s many books and articles are consistently among the best histories we have on the English colonisation of Ireland. See *Kingdom and Colony* and his monumental *Making Ireland British, 1580–1650* (Oxford, 2001). Also informative on the early decades of colonisation is John McGurk’s study of *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland* (Manchester, 1997).
new colonies acquired the characteristics of both a settler society and a tribute empire. Colonial society was formally conceived as two large and interrelated but distinct and viable communities – one Indian, the other Spanish, and each with its own privileges and obligations as expressed in the division between the república de los indios and the república de los españoles. The former consisted of indigenous peoples living within the remaining networks of Indian communities, the latter of Iberian immigrants, Creoles, and peoples of African descent, as well as the mixed-descent castas (‘castes’), who included mestizos and mulattoes. The encomienda system helped establish and perpetuate this framework, and constituted part of the tributary character of colonial society. The encomienda was an enforceable claim to a portion of the labour of a specified Indian community or municipality. The Spanish did not exercise direct control over Indian communities; rather, because the surviving Indian communities retained much of their internal political and economic organisation – including mechanisms for the periodic allocation of communal labour – the institution of encomienda allowed the Spanish to ally with Indian leaders to exploit pre-Columbian indigenous labour practices.  

Although grants of encomienda were prizes awarded only to prominent conquistadors or other colonists, any settler could apply for grants of land. The landed estate – or hacienda – was the institution through which settlers accumulated, made use of and controlled access to land. Disease and depopulation of the countryside, combined with continued Spanish immigration and the proliferation of Old World plants and animals, contributed to the multiplication of haciendas. They initially formed in the rural areas that surrounded cities and towns but quickly expanded outward, extending the frontiers of Spanish influence. Encomenderos or their descendants could and did possess haciendas, but the two were distinct if complementary institutions of colonisation. Both were linked to the silver mining industry, which by the mid-sixteenth century was a mainstay of the colonial economy and a cornerstone of the all-important export sector. The first substantial veins mined were those of Zacatecas in Mexico and Potosí in Bolivia (referred to as Upper Peru during the colonial era), both of which started to bear silver in the late 1540s. Interregional markets emerged, supplied by local manufactories and craft workers, both of which were in the hands of the growing number of castas and poorer Creoles.  

Religious institutions – cathedrals, churches, chapels, monasteries, nunneries and missions – as well as secular and regular ecclesiastical posts also proliferated; these too were increasingly filled by Creoles  

34 The divergent characteristics of pre-Columbian society in Mesoamerica and the Andes meant that the impact of Spanish colonisation would have distinct repercussions in each region. For a concise discussion, see James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz, Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil (New York, 1983), pp. 164–77.  

35 Conceptualisations of the economy of colonial Latin America have been heavily influenced by both dependency and world-systems theory. For an illuminating consideration and critique of such approaches, see the debate between Immanuel Wallerstein and Steve Stern that appeared in the American Historical Review 93/4 (1988): pp. 829–97.
and castas. The political, economic and religious institutions of Spanish colonial society were thus all increasingly tied to local or regional – as opposed to imperial – affairs and interests.

Although in principle a stringent social hierarchy placed peninsular Spaniards at the top and Indians and Africans at the bottom, in practice these distinctions became increasingly difficult to maintain. Indian leaders used their wealth and influence to take advantage of the new economic opportunities created by the Spanish presence, even as their authority within native communities tended to diminish. There also emerged a growing population of castas and of Indian labourers affiliated less with an indigenous community than with the affairs of an expanding settler society. Increasing numbers of indigenous residents left their communities to seek either permanent or temporary wage labour on haciendas. The power of estate owners grew in turn – a tendency that the Spanish crown sought to curb with the formal abolition of encomienda in 1542. Nevertheless, not only did Indian labour remain a cornerstone of the mining and agricultural sectors of colonial society, but the roles of Indians and individuals of mixed descent also became more diverse, allowing some to gain a measure of power and influence in colonial society that defied any formal hierarchy imagined by Spanish colonial authorities.36

The frontiers of colonial Latin America were vast and included the Amazon, the American Southwest, the Rio de La Plata region and most of Chile and Argentina. In these areas transfrontier groups – including missionaries, slavers and traders – often represented the first wave of a growing European presence. Nonetheless, these regions tended to remain borderlands, often beyond the effective reach of European authorities throughout the colonial era.37 Raiding across the borderlands was common practice among both Europeans and indigenous peoples. One striking example is the case of the bandeirantes of Portuguese America. Based in the frontier plateau of modern São Paulo, this collection of poor Portuguese and mixed-race colonists would plunge into the vast forests of the Brazilian interior on slaving and pillaging expeditions that often lasted a year or more. Plunder was distributed among the members of the raiding party, but the primary aim of these ventures was often to capture Indians who could be sold into slavery along the coast where, by the late sixteenth century, sugar plantations proliferated.38 Another sort of transfrontier adaptation, based on semi-sedentary pastoralism, developed on the northern and southern borderlands of Spain’s American empire. The proliferation of wild cattle, horses and other ungulates gave rise to roving groups of herders. There were also pathways to power on the edge of European empires. The Comanche became skilled equestrians and capitalised on their access

37 Donna J. Guy and Thomas E. Sheridan (eds), Contested Ground: Comparative Frontiers on the Northern and Southern Edges of the Spanish Empire (Tucson, AZ, 1998); and Paul W. Mapp, The Elusive West and the Contest for Empire, 1713-1763 (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).
38 A classic discussion is Richard M. Morse, The Bandeirantes: The Historical Role of the Brazilian Pathfinders (New York, 1965).
to firearms (often through French traders) to create an empire centred on the plains of the American Southwest. Confronted with an emergent and expansive indigenous empire, both the British and the Spanish were compelled to reckon with the Comanche. On frontiers, indigenous societies could leverage their own shifting access to varied resources in order to transform themselves and effectively challenge European powers.39

Missionary orders – the Jesuits and Franciscans foremost among them – often established outposts along and beyond the frontiers of European settlement, where they sought to convert indigenous peoples. They lived in surviving villages or in settlements newly created specifically for the purpose of proselytising. Missionary settlements often proved to be the leading edge of further European encroachment. They facilitated colonial expansion through the introduction of European languages, values, rituals, crops and modes of production. But missionary settlements could also, and perhaps inadvertently did, aid indigenous resistance and cultural survival. For example, in the early 1750s Guarani leaders from the Jesuits’ expansive and populous Paraguayan missions used their knowledge of European languages and legal practices to petition Spanish authorities to reverse their decision, forcing the Indians to resettle west of the Uruguay River. And, in northern Mexico, Jesuit administration afforded the Yaquí Indians protection from the encroachment of Spanish miners, thereby allowing them to maintain not only community solidarity, but aspects of their language, religion and material culture as well.40

In Portuguese America and in the scattered Caribbean island colonies of England and France, the plantation enclave became an effective and durable mode of early modern territorial expansion. The Portuguese had already experimented with territorial conquest in the 1530s in India, with the acquisition of coastal territories north of Goa, and in Brazil, where the development of donatary captaincies (grants of land) was meant to foster settlement. But Portugal’s empire retained a largely seaborne character until the last decades of the sixteenth century. Beginning in the 1570s, a combination of factors drove Portugal towards inland expansion. The Dutch offered increasing seaborne competition in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean theatres. Safavid expansion in Persia under Shah Abbas led to the capture of Portugal’s fort at Hormuz, further eroding Portuguese seaborne power in Asia. Mughal expansion into southern India under Shah Jahan ultimately made inland expansion in Asia an even more untenable option than it had previously been. At the same time, the aging state of its poorly maintained fleet contributed to Portugal’s losses at sea. And royal profits as a percentage of the total returns from the spice trade began to fall. After mid-century the example of Spain’s rich American silver mines prompted the Portuguese to renew their own brand of prospecting and looting in Africa and Asia. But the disastrous Barreto–Homem


40 Erick Langer and Robert H. Jackson (eds), The New Latin American Mission History (Lincoln, NE, 1995).
expedition to gain control of the gold producing region far up the Zambezi River testified to the difficulties of securing territorial control anywhere in Indian Ocean Asia. So it was in the Atlantic that the late-sixteenth-century development of sugar plantations in Brazil gave Portugal’s empire the territorial aspect that would define both it and the Caribbean for centuries.

The plantation enclaves of the Americas varied greatly in terms of their location, development and organisation. At the outset, plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean drew their organisation and technology and even some of their specialised personnel directly from their Atlantic predecessors. Genoese capital helped to deliver the first water- and oxen-powered mills in the sixteenth century. The system of hereditary land grants and attendant privileges – designed to lure settlers to the Atlantic – found their parallels in the sixteenth-century Americas as well. And skilled technicians and sugar masters arrived from Madeira and the Canaries. In the Americas, they oversaw the work of Amerindian and, increasingly, African slaves.

For all the plantation enclaves, large inputs of manual labour were essential at nearly every stage of cultivation and production. The technology required for refining sugar was costly and required constant upkeep. The substantial financial and human resources already coursing through Portugal’s global exchange networks were crucial for making sugar plantations viable in Brazil. Financing continued to come from various parts of Europe, while labour came increasingly from West and sub-Saharan Africa. As Amerindians died in large numbers from disease, malnutrition and overwork, European slavers, traders and shippers increased the numbers of Africans sent to Brazil. Africans began to outnumber Amerindians on the plantations of Brazil’s eastern littoral by 1580. From that point forward, African slavery became inextricably bound to American plantation agriculture. Before the demise of slavery in the Americas in the nineteenth century, approximately 12.5 million Africans would face the Middle Passage, where mortality ranged between 12 and 13 per cent.

In the seventeenth century, the Americas increasingly became a theatre of international competition for commercial, human and natural resources. The initial English and French ventures in the Caribbean began not as plantation enclaves but as colonies of settlement and trade. England’s early presence in the Caribbean combined the settlement features of its Irish colonies with a trading-post model similar to that deployed later by the East India Company. In Barbados, where settlement began in the 1620s, indentured labourers grew food for local consumption and cultivated tobacco for export. Contraband trade with the Spanish mainland provided additional commercial opportunities. These island outposts could defend English interests in North America from Spanish incursions, while

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41 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History (New York, 1993); and Ernst van Veen, Decay or Defeat: An Inquiry into the Portuguese Decline in Asia, 1580-1645 (Leiden, 2000).

42 See the website Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces.
supporting English raiding activities aimed at capturing the bullion shipped from Spanish mines. The French began trading with the Caribs of the Lesser Antilles, but like the English were quick to expand their commerce with the mainland Spanish colonies. In 1635 the French Crown began to award special privileges to joint-stock companies that would undertake Caribbean settlement. Initial efforts focused heavily on Guadeloupe and Martinique. Company stockholders often enjoyed a monopoly over not only trade but all lands they could make productive. At first this meant the settlement of thousands of French Catholics, many of whom worked as indentured servants. Here, too, the crown and colonial planners intended settlement both in the form of trading posts and immigrant communities that could support armed attacks on Spain’s silver fleet.

Neither sugar plantations nor African slavery figured significantly in the initial English and French Caribbean colonisation schemes. But geography, disease and the profitability of sugar combined with the availability of capital, know-how and abundant forced labour to foster plantation development. Sugar plantation reached new heights in terms of ecological devastation, human violence and the centralisation of both ownership and oversight. The Dutch played an important role in the development of Caribbean sugar plantations. After a short-lived occupation of the Brazilian Northeast (1630–54), the Dutch continued in their pivotal role as Atlantic shippers, bringing sugarcane, milling technology and African slaves to the English and French Caribbean. African slaves appeared to survive the imported tropical diseases, especially malaria and yellow fever, better than European settlers and, as in Brazil, became the principal source of manual labour. The Dutch also shared their knowledge of cultivation techniques and sold milling equipment. As ever larger tracts of the most fertile land were needed to capitalise on advances in milling technology, slave populations had to increase as well. The whole process accelerated as improvements in shipping and navigation technologies meant that both sugar and slaves could be transported more cheaply.

The successful growth of the plantation as a form of territorial settlement in the Caribbean occurred first on Barbados, then in the English Leeward Islands and finally in the French Antilles. The distribution of wealth and power was radically skewed in favour of a dwindling white minority that often comprised no more than 25 per cent of the total population. Virtually all the best agricultural lands were planted with sugarcane, making these fertile islands food importers. Atlantic economies by the eighteenth century were characterised by intensified regional specialisation: Caribbean sugar and rum, tobacco and rice from the North American Southeast, slaves from Africa, capital and technology from Europe. Free white settlers often left the Caribbean for the North American mainland, feeding European expansion there. Meanwhile, the explosive tensions engendered by the maw of Caribbean plantation enclaves of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would culminate in the Haitian Revolution (c. 1790–1804). In the same period, the political shifts in Europe, and especially the process of industrialisation in England, were about to transform the configuration and nature of European empires in the nineteenth century.43

Although early voyages of exploration led by the Genoese John Cabot (1497) and Jacques Cartier (1534–42) established the basis for later English and French claims to North America, the north European pursuit of overseas empire began in earnest nearly a century after the Columbian voyages and the Spanish occupation of the Caribbean. Attempts to found English settlements on the mid-Atlantic coast in the last decades of the sixteenth century failed. But Samuel de Champlain's 1603 expedition up the St Lawrence River opened the way for French penetration of what later became eastern Canada and eventually expansion into the Great Lakes region, the Ohio valley and down the Mississippi River into the territory that comprised Louisiana. Though towns were soon established at Quebec and Montreal, the French presence in North America was slight and transient well into the eighteenth century. Fur trappers and traders and small bands of Catholic missionaries formed the vanguard of a sparse and sporadic French population. The trappers or *coureurs des bois* (forest rovers) had begun to exploit the seemingly inexhaustible beaver population of North America even before Champlain's arrival in the early 1600s. The warm, water-repellent fur pelts of these industrious animals were in great demand in Europe, where the indigenous beaver population had been driven to extinction in many areas by excessive trapping and hunting. Close behind the *coureurs des bois* came French, and later Dutch, traders, who built overland networks of forts and warehouses, where the furs could be marketed and prepared for transport across the Atlantic. In many ways the fur trading networks were overland versions of the trading-post empires established in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and these fortified market nodes often developed into the earliest European towns in North America.  

French, and later English and Dutch, trappers readily adopted the techniques, traps and other tools that the Amerindian peoples had long used in pursuit of beaver, mink, otter and other animal pelts. From clothing fashioned from animal hides and canoes to snowshoes and moccasins, trappers also assimilated more broadly to the formidable Indian cultures they encountered as they traversed the woods and lakes of North America in pursuit of furs for the market. Trappers often took Indian women as spouses, and they in turn provided critical ties to indigenous communities, local knowledge and hunting and foraging skills essential for survival in the wilderness, particularly during the winter months, when most of the trapping took place. But the cultural exchange was by no means one-sided. Trappers and traders introduced iron kettles, fishhooks and steel knives as well as muskets, woollen blankets and a variety of other European goods into

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44 Harold Innis’s account of *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto, 1956) has long been the standard work on the fur trade in New France. But in recent decades new research and publications, particularly the pioneering articles of Ann M. Carlos and Frank D. Lewis, have taken the history of the trade to new levels of analysis and understanding. For a superb summary of their many essays, see ‘The Economic History of the Fur Trade’, at http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/carlos.lewis.furtrade.
Amerindian cultures. And both as allies and competitors, Indian peoples became engaged in the trans-Atlantic commercial network. In areas controlled by the French, Indian hunters supplied most of the fur pelts that were bartered mainly for European manufactured goods – but rarely alcohol and the trinkets that have long been featured in popular accounts of the trade. The Indians themselves delivered the furs to trading posts that chartered French companies, such as the Compagnie d’Occident, leased to individual merchants, who were in charge of transporting the pelts and marketing them in Europe.45

The Catholic missionary orders that advanced in tandem with, or at times ahead of, the trappers into transfrontier regions introduced Christian rituals and beliefs into Indian societies. Though enduring conversions were usually few, and the woodlands of North America yielded a disproportionate number of martyrs, some Indian communities, particularly among the Hurons, welcomed the French missionary presence, either to cement alliances with the French or connections with the fur trading network.46 Trading networks and missionary stations, as well as the mapping of the new territories by French explorers, facilitated the immigration and settlement of French farmers and artisans who sought to make permanent homes in North America. Unwittingly, these transfrontier agents were also the carriers of diseases, such as measles and smallpox, which proved as lethal for the North American Indians, who had no immunity, as they had for the Aztecs and Incas. The depletion and demoralisation of the Indian population left sparsely peopled and weakly defended frontiers for Europeans to settle. But for a variety of demographic and cultural reasons, the number of French migrants who intended to settle permanently in North America remained minuscule well into the eighteenth century. At the outset of the Seven Years’ War (or the French and Indian War, as it was known in North America) in 1756, scarcely 70,000 French nationals were spread in several urban clusters, small communities and tiny bands across the extent of the Bourbons’ possessions. This discrepancy between bloated French territorial claims and their failure to settle more than a small fraction of the lands at issue would prove a major factor in France’s loss of Canada in the war.47

Fishermen and merchants, rather than trappers, provided the entering wedge of Dutch and English colonisation and settlement in North America. And missionaries were conspicuously absent from the early English and Dutch exploratory expeditions and trading parties. As had been the case with the French, Dutch and English fishermen working the cod-abundant waters off the eastern seaboard came into contact with local Indian peoples, who were quite willing to barter fur pelts for fish hooks and copper kettles. The 1609 expedition led by the English explorer

47 Frank McLynn, 1759: The Year that Made Great Britain the Master of the World (New York, 2004), Introduction.
Henry Hudson opened the river and adjoining valley lands that were given his name to settlement by the Dutch, who had commissioned his probes. Initially they concentrated on establishing trading posts that provided new channels for the fur trade with the Iroquois nations, the Mohegans and other Indian peoples in what later became eastern New York and New Jersey. Soon thereafter the town of New Amsterdam was established on Manhattan Island as a more diversified entrepôt at the mouth of the Hudson River. To encourage permanent migration by Dutch farmers, the West India Company (Westindische Compagnie) made extensive land grants to wealthy burghers and noblemen on the condition that they recruit and provide transport for at least fifty settlers to clear and cultivate estates in the fertile Hudson valley. But largely owing to the excessive powers that the charters granted under what was known as the *patroon* system to the estate holders, few of the lands leased under these feudal-style arrangements were able to attract sufficient numbers of Dutch cultivators to make them viable.

The Dutch managed to drive out their Swedish rivals, who had founded a colony in the Delaware River basin in the 1630s. Nonetheless, their investment in North America never matched that expended in the Caribbean or Brazil, much less their commitment to winning control of the Indian Ocean spice trade. One gauge of the low priority the Dutch gave to North America was the paucity of their long-term migration, even in the decades when their presence peaked. Despite a proliferation of promotional literature and material incentives, there were at best a few thousand Dutch settlers by the 1640s as compared to at least 60,000 from the British Isles. Not surprisingly, when trading and expansionist rivalries between the Dutch and English led to a series of global Anglo-Dutch wars in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, the Dutch concentrated on protecting their trading empire in Asia and plantation colonies in the Caribbean and Brazil rather than the underpopulated colony of New Netherlands centred on the Hudson River valley. By the Treaty of Westminster, which ended the Third Anglo-Dutch War in 1667, the Dutch ceded New Amsterdam (renamed New York) to the English in exchange for retaining Suriname on the northern coast of South America.48

Fishermen, trappers and fur traders were as pivotal to the beginnings of English colonisation in North America as they were for the French and Dutch. But the much larger volume of English settlers migrating to the New World beginning in the early 1600s meant that through much of the century these transfrontier agents and their enterprises would play a less important role than in rival colonies. Religious dissidents figured prominently in early immigration to New England, while the lesser gentry, second sons of noble lineage and their body servants, and indentured labourers sought to make their fortunes in the Chesapeake region and further south. The enclosure movement in England, which displaced large numbers of smallholders, tenants and agricultural labourers, as well as persisting inflation, swelled the number of migrants through much of the century. Farmers and foresters dominated production both for domestic and overseas trade, and

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by the last decades of the seventeenth century a substantial merchant class had developed in port cities along the eastern seaboard. Forest products, including timber, pitch and tar, were the main exports from the colonies, though tobacco proved the key to survival for settlements in Virginia and the upper south. Having ousted their Swedish and Dutch rivals and held the French at bay or driven them towards the western wilderness, the English began to settle further and further inland from New England to the Carolinas.49

The ever-increasing settler population soon proved a far more formidable and enduring threat to the indigenous peoples of North America than that posed by the French or Dutch. Old World diseases ravaged the coastal Indian peoples, whose abandoned fields and hunting grounds were eagerly claimed by incoming migrants. English settlers surmised that the appalling mortality rates among indigenous peoples were part of a larger divine plan. The Indians were given little credit for supplying the food that, in the early stages of colonisation, proved critical to the survival of English settlements. Perversely, the cultivating practices that provided sustenance for the settlers were either ignored or disparaged, in large part because agriculture was largely women’s work in Indian societies. They were also frequently cited as evidence of the fact that the Indians had proved incapable of making productive use of the abundance of the land and resources of the New World. These assessments appeared to justify the consensus of all but a few dissenters that Indian cultures had little to offer more advanced Europeans and ought to be supplanted by western ways. This belief was only belatedly matched by efforts at conversion, education and assimilation.50 The settlers’ determination to dispossess and remove through war or forced migration the Indians who were regarded by both early colonisers (and later pioneers who opened up the American West) as obstacles to the advance of civilisation and material increase, and to erase the cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples, calls into question Frederick Jackson Turner’s iconic characterisation of the American frontier as a locus of freedom.

In roughly the same decades as the Puritans and Virginians were struggling to establish viable settlements in eastern North America, their Dutch counterparts, beginning in 1652, developed a small outpost in southwest Africa. Intended initially as a fortified way station, where Dutch merchant and warships making the long voyage around the Cape of Good Hope to the East Indies could take on fresh water and other provisions, Cape Town soon became the base for the slow, but steady, colonisation of the interior of southern Africa. The temperate


climate, and the adequate rainfall in areas adjacent to and directly east of Cape Town, made it possible to farm crops such as tobacco and wheat and to breed livestock for sale to passing ships. The sparse population of Khoikhoi pastoralists and San hunter-gatherers in these areas, which was ever more scant in the arid regions to the northeast, made it possible for Boers (Dutch farmers) to settle in the interior and to carve out extensive cattle- and sheep-raising estates. The advance of these transfrontier settlers, who came to be known as trekboers (migrating farmers), provided the impetus for the creation of a larger European settlement colony across the southern cone of Africa. The trekboer ranchers established large, extended families on their widely separated holdings, and warred, traded, enslaved and procreated with the San and especially the Khoikhoi, who both resisted and cohabited with the Europeans. The offspring of such liaisons formed the basis for the large, mixed-racial or ‘coloured’ population of present-day South Africa.

Phase III: Industrialisation, Tropical Dependencies and New Frontiers of Settlement in Oceania and Africa

Between 1776 and 1810 a series of upheavals – in British North America, France and its Caribbean colonies, and later in Spanish and Portuguese America – radically altered the European imperial landscape. Revolution and independence were by no means inevitable outcomes of these conflicts. Especially in British North America, French Saint Domingue and throughout Spanish America, deep class, ethnic, racial and regional divisions meant that within each imperial sphere settlers shared little in the way of an overarching identity that might underwrite a unified sense of revolutionary purpose or concerted action. Interregional trade within colonies may have served to forge broader inter-empire ties, but communication, transportation and commercial networks oriented to the export of foodstuffs and raw materials often linked colonised regions to European metropoles rather than with each other. Throughout the colonial Americas, the most clearly discernible loyalties were those linking colonists to their locality or region and then to their home country. Over the course of the late eighteenth century, however, a number of factors coalesced to spark revolutionary activity and strengthen the appeal of formal political independence.

By the late 1700s, discontent with colonial rule had spread beyond political and intellectual dissidents to formerly loyal expatriate European elites, and had begun to influence urban and rural residents alike. The timing in different colonial regions varied, as did the specific economic and political issues at stake. But there were nevertheless broad similarities and parallels across the Americas. One of these was the embrace of republican ideology, which had emerged from decades of intellectual ferment in eighteenth-century western Europe. The appeal to settlers and mestizo or mulatto social groups of a government that more thoroughly represented their interests and addressed their concerns was further strengthened when European imperial regimes sought to impose tighter strictures on economic
and political activities in their American territories. Often the tightening of metropolitan control followed periods of relative autonomy in the colonies, during which settlers had gained greater influence in economic, political and religious life. Britain’s increased taxes and tighter restrictions on the trade and migration of its nationals in North America in the 1760s, the successive Bourbon reforms in the far-flung Spanish Empire during the eighteenth century and state intervention in the agricultural, commercial and manufacturing sectors of Portugal in the mid-1700s were all seen by settler social groups as assaults on their constricted political influence and economic well-being. Metropolitan interests increasingly appeared at odds with those of the colonies. Settlers found themselves subjected to greater regulation and stiffer limitations at the same time that greater numbers of wealthy – and often Creole or mixed-race – planters, merchants and professionals sought trading opportunities and political inclusion.51

Of all the anti-colonial struggles, the upheavals in French Saint Domingue provide the best example of a complete social revolution. Civil war broke out in 1790 between the white and mulatto residents of this French plantation colony. In 1791, the colony’s slaves seized the opportunity provided by the quarrels among local elites to foment a general rebellion that ultimately came under the leadership of Toussaint L’Ouverture. By 1804, when Jean Jacques Dessalines finally proclaimed the independence of the nation of Haiti, the revolution had proven so violent and protracted that the island’s productive capacity was severely crippled. The French and Haitian revolutions had profound and far-reaching consequences throughout the Caribbean and the Americas.52 The Haitian Revolution signalled the death of the plantation as a mode of formal imperial expansion (though not of slave-based sugar production).

Such upheavals – with some important exceptions – made the Americas no longer formally a part of Europe’s imperial domain.53 Instead, the third phase of colonisation was dominated by a shift to territorial conquest and the creation of tropical dependencies and settler colonies throughout Africa and South and Southeast Asia. Here too, the last decades of the eighteenth century were pivotal. Two fundamentally transformative processes that began in the late 1700s significantly reconfigured the nature of colonisation and settlement worldwide in the nineteenth century. Watershed advances in science and technology, which were even more concentrated in Europe than in the early modern era, greatly increased the advantages the expansive powers of the west enjoyed relative to all other societies in extracting resources, manufacturing, building commercial.

51 Jaime E. Rodríguez O, The Independence of Spanish America (New York, 1998); Knight, The Caribbean, pp. 159–92. The case of Brazil is an exception: independence was achieved with little violence, and for a time it remained a monarchy. See Emilia Viotti da Costa, The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), pp. 1–23.
52 David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus (eds.), A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean (Bloomington, IN, 1997).
53 Britain and Spain, for example, held onto their Caribbean colonies, and Britain and France still controlled vast domains in North America.
networks and waging war. These innovations, and the late nineteenth-century medical breakthroughs that made it possible to control or mollify the effects of such tropical diseases as malaria and yellow fever, allowed expansive European nations to establish formal colonial control over much of Africa, Asia and the Pacific by the early 1900s. From the 1870s the surge in European empire building was accompanied by an intensification of globalisation that by the end of the century left Europeans and increasingly Americans and Japanese in control of much of the world’s trade, communications networks, manufacturing and finance. The improvements in transportation and expanded commercial linkages also ushered in an unprecedented wave of emigration from Europe to temperate regions in Oceania, the southern cone of South America and Africa, where the influx of migrants gave great impetus to frontier expansionism and the displacement of indigenous peoples. Even late-industrialising empires, particularly Tsarist Russia and to a lesser extent Manchu China, made use of railroads, telegraph lines and breech-loading rifles both to ward off western rivals and to extend and tighten their control, often through substantial settlement, over the eastern and central Asian frontier lands that both sought to colonise, and which consequently soon became major points of contention between them.54

Nations, most notably Spain and Portugal, that had been major overseas colonisers in the first centuries of expansion but participated only marginally in the later scientific and early industrial revolutions, experienced a steady diminution of their influence and ability to project their power overseas. As we have seen, Portugal had lost most of its trading empire in Asia to the Dutch in the seventeenth century, but still managed in the nineteenth century to enlarge its holdings in parts of Africa, in large part by playing the northern European powers against one another. The rise of extensive formal colonies in the eastern hemisphere originated on the island of Java. The Dutch established a fortified trading base, similar to those that served as nodes for the Portuguese trading-post empire, at Batavia in 1619. The need to protect Batavia from periodic assaults launched by uneasy monarchs in central Java as well as pirates based on Sumatra embroiled the Dutch in the politics of neighbouring kingdoms in Java and south Sumatra. In addition to their military forays into the districts surrounding Batavia, Dutch interventions in quarrels over succession and inter-state conflicts resulted in steady accretions of territory and subjects. In the early stages of what would become the conquest of the entire island of Java, the Dutch relied on the long-standing practice of divide-and-conquer that, aside from advances in their war fleet, owed little to either scientific or technological advances in Europe. Small, but disciplined and well-organised, mixed forces of European and local soldiers usually proved a match for the larger armies of the Sultans of Mataram or other local rulers. And the Dutch skilfully entered into alliances with deposed or disgruntled claimants to overthrow strong monarchs who sought to resist their dominance on Java or nearby

islands. Following the brief occupation of Java by the British in the Napoleonic Wars, the Dutch used the island, with its large population and highly productive rice and sugar economy, as the base for the conquest of the ‘outer islands’ of what is today the archipelago that constitutes the nation of Indonesia. Throughout the Netherlands Indies, they ruled mainly through indigenous officials, drawn at the higher levels from the well-entrenched Javanese nobility (priyayi). These regents were supervised by Dutch counterparts, or residents, who in turn answered to a governor-general and an increasingly elaborate European bureaucratic hierarchy residing mainly in Batavia and its environs.55

Perhaps because it began well over a century later and was carried out by the first industrial nation, the rise of British power on the Indian subcontinent is usually linked to the technological advances so pivotal for the age of high imperialism in the later nineteenth century. But the first stages in the building of the British Raj from the 1740s onward bore strong similarities to the Dutch conquest of Java. Like the Dutch, the British were drawn into the rivalries of regional rulers, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. Their backing for one prince against others was often prompted by alliances that adversary potentates had struck with the French, whose series of global wars with the British were fought in India as well as the Caribbean, North America and Europe itself.

From the late eighteenth until the mid-twentieth century the Indian empire served as one of the largest and most lucrative markets for Britain’s manufactured products from textiles to locomotives, a major source of raw materials essential for its factories, and by far the most favoured of Britain’s tropical dependencies for its surplus investment capital. India also generated a massive migrant flow to British-ruled colonies. Though perhaps the majority of these immigrants were seasonal workers, thousands made up non-European strata of permanent settlers who, together with their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, far surpassed the prodigious levels of emigration from Europe in the nineteenth century.

The changes engendered in Europe by the Industrial Revolution had profound consequences for imperial expansion in Africa. Imperial policymakers viewed colonies both as suppliers of raw materials and sources of cheap labour, as well as potential markets for cheap manufactured goods. Colonial policies through much of the nineteenth century reflected these priorities. In coastal Africa trading settlements remained points of intersection between expansive inland trading networks and global seaborne traffic, and served as points from which European colonisers established other coastal settlements. Industrialisation transformed and deepened the economic, social, political and cultural repercussions of colonial expansion. New technologies in communication, medicine, firearms and transportation made it difficult, if not impossible, for indigenous leaders throughout Africa to hold the intruders at bay. European incursions were now far more successful than they would have been a century earlier. African peoples, even in more remote areas, now came face to face with Europeans.

55 M.C. Ricklefs, A History of Modern Indonesia (Bloomington, IN, 1981), chaps 3, 6 and 9.
The process of colonisation varied among European powers and from region to region. But it consisted of a combination of territorial control by chartered companies, land grants to individual settlers and direct rule. The construction of railroads, the implementation of scientific farming and plantation agriculture, rapid increases in mining and the shift from food crops to the cultivation of exportable cash crops all exemplify the reorganisation of local economies to serve the needs of industrial Europe. Colonial officials drew increasingly sharp distinctions between European and native populations. Through control of such institutions as governance, the military, law, the police, science, education, religion and health, colonial regimes reconfigured social, political, economic, ethnic and cultural relationships between Europeans and non-Europeans and among local peoples. This extension of power entailed the accommodation of indigenous secular and religious leaders. Local agents were vital partners in the overland trade networks that stretched ever farther into the African interior.  

In the nineteenth century, extensive areas throughout Africa became sites for the expansion and development of new settler societies. The genesis of two of the largest and richest of these settler societies, South Africa and Algeria, preceded the late-nineteenth-century scramble and owed little to the industrial competition and great power rivalries that spurred colonisation elsewhere. As we have seen, extensive Dutch settlement in South Africa had begun in the coastal areas around Table Bay in the middle decades of the seventeenth century and spread over much of the southwestern interior regions by the late 1700s. As early as 1702, the first contacts were made between trekboer settlers on the transfrontier and the Xhosa and other Bantu peoples near the Great Fish River. By the last years of the century, the interaction between the Boers and the Bantus became one of the defining processes of South African history. Another was the arrival of the British in this era of revolution and interstate warfare in Europe. Seeking to preempt efforts by republican France to increase its influence in the region, the British ousted the feeble Dutch regime in 1795 after the French had occupied the Netherlands. In the following decades British efforts to control the Boer settlers, and especially attempts to regulate settlers’ relations with the indigenous peoples (including a campaign to free Khoikhoi and San slaves), gave great impetus to Boer migration into the interior. Culminating in the ‘great trek’, which began in 1836, the mass migration of the Boer settlers led to more than a half-century of wars with ever shifting alliances. Initially, the British were more or less content to let the pastoralist Boer trekkers take refuge and establish a patchwork of ‘republics’ in what later became the Orange Free State and Transvaal. But a seemingly endless succession of wars with powerful African kingdoms, most famously the Zulu, and fears that the Boers might ally themselves with imperial Germany or other European rivals forced the British to secure the southern and eastern coast and to intervene repeatedly in conflicts in the interior. Missionary pressures, and especially the discovery of rich diamond and gold deposits in the Orange Free State in 1867 and the Transvaal

in 1886, led to an influx of British migrants. The threats these changes posed for the Boer republics led to violent clashes with the increasingly assertive British and ultimately to the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, which resulted in the absorption of the Orange Free State and Transvaal into the Union of South Africa in 1910.57

Excepting perhaps South Africa, none of Britain’s settler colonies in Africa matched French Algeria in strategic importance, in the number of European settlers who chose to make it a permanent home, or the extent to which French prestige depended on its domination. France’s colonisation of Algeria, beginning in the 1830s, had little to do with resources or great power rivalries. Cynically manipulating an insult to the French ambassador in Algiers, Charles X and his advisors sought to deflect rising dissent against an inept Bourbon monarchy by sending an expeditionary force into the Maghreb. A deceptively easy conquest of the city of Algiers opened the way for a violent, forty-year struggle against the overwhelmingly Muslim Berber and Arab population in the farmlands, mountains and deserts of the colony the French would forcibly carve out of North Africa. Nonetheless, within a decade of the capture of Algiers, significant numbers of French immigrants began to occupy the towns and lands on the Mediterranean coast, where the climate was temperate. The French applied a razzia or scorched-earth policy, which led to the destruction of villages, livestock and woodlands, and the indiscriminate slaughter of the indigenous inhabitants.

In the following decades, successive waves of mainly Italian and Spanish migrants – very often enticed by special incentives offered by the colonial regime – swelled the European population from roughly 140,000 in the 1850s to over 700,000 just before the First World War. As was the case in South Africa, the indigenous population, who unlike those in the Americas and Oceania had long shared and built up similar immunities to the diseases that afflicted the European intruders, continued to far outnumber the colons or settlers. But most of the Arabs and Berbers were dispossessed and driven into areas where the soil was infertile and often lacking in sufficient rainfall for cultivation. Some went hungry or starved, many became landless labourers or poorly paid workers on the margins of society, and all but a handful of Algerian assimiles were deprived of political power and the civil liberties that the French republic proclaimed the set piece of its mission civilisatrice. These conditions of inequality and oppression intensified throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and gave rise to sporadic resistance and eventually the violent revolutionary movement that led to the forced repatriation of the colons and gave birth to the Algerian nation in the 1960s.58

Although the ‘scramble’ of the great powers of Europe for colonies at the end of the nineteenth century also encompassed the Pacific Islands or Oceania, the

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57 Leonard Thompson, A History of South Africa (New Haven, CT, 1990), and Freda Troup, South Africa: An Historical Introduction (Harrmonds worth, 1975).

basis for the largest settlement colonies outside of the Americas and Africa was established a century earlier in the late 1700s. The migration of English colonists who intended to settle permanently in both Australia and New Zealand was roughly contemporaneous, but the outcome of their arrival and advance diverged significantly. Both Australia and New Zealand contained extensive temperate regions with adequate rainfall for agriculture, but the Australian interior was semi-arid and suitable mainly for ranching, while much of the South Island of New Zealand was too cold for more than herding. As a result, pastoralism, especially sheep raising, became an economic mainstay in both colonies. The transfrontier pioneers who provided the entering wedge for the early colonisation of Australia were convicts transported to relieve the overcrowded prisons of Great Britain. In New Zealand whalers, as well as merchants seeking to exploit the kauri timber of the North Island, were the first Europeans to establish ongoing relations with the Maori population.

In contrast to the indigenous peoples or Aborigines whom the English settlers encountered in Australia, the Maori were more densely settled (there were as many as 125–130,000 on the eve of European colonisation, living mostly on the North Island), and lived in cohesive and well-organised tribal and clan groups. Competition and intermittent warfare among the clans made the Maori formidable adversaries. They adapted more easily than Australian Aboriginals to the European influx, both by transforming their traditional ways of farming and actively participating in international trading networks. The dynamics of contact and contestation were radically different in the Australian colonies. Though colonial officials sought to promote agriculture, most of the early settlers preferred to herd sheep and hunt. Both in the coastal areas and interior they clashed with the Aboriginal peoples. Living and moving about in small bands, the Aborigines were generally despised by the Europeans for the low level of their material culture as well as their physical appearance and vagabond ways. While the Maori population had begun to stabilise by the late nineteenth century, the assault of the colonisers on the much more dispersed Australian aboriginal population was a good deal more brutal. In Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania), most egregiously, the indigenous peoples had been all but eliminated by the 1870s, often through systematic massacres amounting to ethnic cleansing, including the infamous ‘Black Line’ campaign in the early 1830s.

As the indigenous populations declined precipitously, ceded the best farming and pasture lands to colonisers and were driven to the margins of society or increasingly relegated to mainly subordinate positions within the colonial system, the settlers of Australia and New Zealand followed the lead of the Canadians in asserting political autonomy within the broader framework of the British Empire. Largely peacefully but inexorably, first Canada and then several decades later Australia and New Zealand won dominion status between the late 1860s and 1907. Having brought the indigenous peoples under control, the leaders of the new
dominions set about putting exclusionary ‘whites only’ immigration laws in place that were intended to insure settler dominance for an indefinite future.59

The Dynamics of European Expansion, Colonisation and Settlement

Europe was in many respects the least likely of the prominent expansionist societies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to emerge as the progenitor of transoceanic discovery, intercontinental empires and an incipient global commercial network. As we have argued, by most of the commonly cited indices of development – including level of urbanisation, sophistication of handicraft production, population and capacity to sustain large military forces – Europe lagged far behind the empires of Asia, the Middle East, Sudanic Africa and the Americas. But as they began to probe, however tentatively, into the largely unknown Atlantic Ocean, Europeans soon found that they had a number of select advantages – above all highly navigable and relatively well-armed warships – that allowed them to sustain more direct contacts abroad, to exploit rather constricted but often lucrative commercial and political openings, and to achieve dominance in parts of Asia, the Americas and (to a far lesser extent) sub-Saharan Africa.

The success or failure of what were often highly improvised expansionist schemes depended both upon forces within Europe and, almost invariably a good deal more, on the nature of the societies and situations the Europeans encountered overseas. European deficiencies – such as grain shortages, limited commercial linkages and especially what proved to be a narrow range of exportable commodities – spurred expansion and motivated Europeans to take advantage of borrowed technologies in novel ways. Remarkably rapid European advances in metal working, scientific instrumentation, the harnessing of inanimate power and military discipline and weaponry proved essential to their successes overseas. But internal circumstances could impede expansion. Political and geographic fragmentation, for example, spurred competition, and hence economic and technological development, but it also meant that throughout the more than four centuries under consideration Europeans remained engaged in incessant internal wars that often extended overseas. These conflicts not only consumed their rather limited resources, including human lives, but they were also manipulated by peoples seeking to fend off western colonisation and settlement.

Long before they began to break out across the Atlantic, Europeans were familiar with a range of models for overseas expansion that facilitated adaptation to the very diverse societies and circumstances they encountered as they moved

59 Perhaps the best general survey of the settlement of Australia and the resistance and oppression of the indigenous peoples can be found in Kiernan Blood and Soil, chap. 7. For New Zealand, see Harrison M. Wright, New Zealand, 1769–1840: Early Years of Western Contact (Cambridge, MA, 1959); and Alan D. Ward, A Show of Justice (Canberra, 1974).
into different regions across the globe. Whether trading-post empires, plantation enclaves, tribute systems, formal colonisation or extensive overseas settlement, the mode Europeans deployed in a given contact zone was determined in part by cultural proclivities and the priorities of rulers and social groups committed to expansion in the metropoles. But at least until well into the nineteenth century, the slow pace of communication and transportation relative to the often vast distances travelled and the small numbers of Europeans who ventured overseas meant that local exigencies, opportunities, disease environments and the strengths and weaknesses of host societies were the most critical factors shaping the nature and impact of western overseas enterprises. From the momentous decision of the Chinese to abandon their overseas voyages and neglect their war and merchant fleet, for example, to the dynastic conflict between Atahualpa and Huáscar that divided the Incas on the eve of Spanish arrival, Europeans benefited from circumstances not of their making as they sought to establish themselves overseas. Foremost among these was disease. The pathogens carried by Europeans and the millions of Africans whom they forcibly transported across the Atlantic proved devastating for such peoples as those of the Americas and Oceania, thereby facilitating settlement. By contrast, until the late nineteenth century diseases for which westerners had little or no immunity greatly limited their capacity to settle further inland throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa. For Europeans everywhere in both the pre- and post-industrial eras, their ability to trade, build empires, extract resources and settle the land hinged also on the degree of collaboration or resistance of local elites and their subjects. And much like the Europeans whose encroachment they sought to fend off, conquered, enslaved and displaced non-western peoples fought back using borrowed technologies, learning and modes of organisation in circumstances not of their choosing.
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