

THE EARLY MODERN ATLANTIC WORLD

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Historians have recently been adopting an Atlantic model for the history of the founding period of American history and this approach is transforming our understanding. Colonization has always been an Atlantic subject, of course; it is by definition the transportation of European people and institutions westward across the ocean and the import of people, goods, and influences eastward into the Old World. In older paradigms, this field was configured as imperial history, focusing on institutional relationships between capitals in Europe and settlers in America, or economic history that dealt with the production, procurement, and organization of trade and tradegoods across and around the Atlantic and beyond. Sometimes culture was the formulating principle, looking at the flow of religious, political, artistic, and other ideas and influences.

All these conceptions are still important and feed into the way scholars conceptualize the early modern Atlantic today, but with differences. The modern field recognizes the fluidity of sixteenth and seventeenth century relationships and seeks to avoid anachronistic applications of later political divisions. The history of the seventeenth century is distorted if we read backward from the creation of the United States, for example. The categories were different in the early colonial period. England's entrance into colonization had been delayed by the nation's relative poverty and backwardness. Raleigh's failed colony of Roanoke was founded in the mid-1580s, and it was not until 1607 with Jamestown that an English plantation managed to hang on into permanence. Not only was this over a century after the Spanish first began to colonize in the Americas, but the first European settlement within the future United States--St. Augustine in Florida--had already existed for more than forty years. England's lateness on the scene meant that they took the part of America that had already been rejected as unpromising by Spanish and Portuguese venturers.

Even the category "English" needs to be questioned. How would English actors answer a question about who they were? We have long known that an Englishman would

often name his county of origin if asked what country he was of. For example, Anthony Parkhurst, who ventured into Newfoundland in 1578, wrote that he was from "Kent and Christendome."¹ Kent was his county, and "Christendome" meant Europe. England was not a relevant category for him, and the concept of Christendom had survived the Reformation that split the Christian churches. England was only becoming a unified entity; there was a definite north-south divide within the island as well as distinct Welsh and Scottish nationalities. Early travellers, trying to get their readers to understand the variety of Indian polities and culture, drew on familiar examples of diversity at home. William Wood wrote that northern New England Indians could not communicate with those from southern New England any more than people from northern England could understand those from the South. As Christopher Levett wrote of the range of languages within the Algonquian family, "Their Language differs as English and Welsh." The Pilgrims found the Indians' language "barbarous," but they had also thought the Dutch language "strange and uncouth" when they had previously found refuge in the Netherlands.²

All the categories were different from those we expect for early modern Europeans, and the categories could also change in unexpected ways. For example, Captain John Smith, who is credited with saving the Jamestown colony, wrote his autobiography at the end of his life. He tells us that he had been apprenticed to an English merchant as a teenager, but he found that life boring and ran away to become a soldier on the side of the Protestant Dutch who were fighting *against* the Roman Catholic Spanish Hapsburgs for their independence. After a few years and having returned to England, Smith went back to the continent and signed on to serve *with* the Hapsburg armies resisting the encroachment of the Ottoman Empire into Eastern Europe. He wrote that he "was desirous to see more of the world, and trie his fortune against the Turkes, both lamenting and repenting to have seene so many Christians slaughter one another."³

¹Parkhurst to Richard Hakluyt the elder, in E. G. R. Taylor, ed., The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts (London, 1935), I, 131.

²Christopher Levett, A Voyage unto New England (London, 1624), 22; William Wood, New Englands Prospect (London, 1634), 92; Robert Cushman, A Sermon Preached in Plimmoth in New-England (London, 1622), 18; William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York, 1952), 16.

³The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith, in Philip L. Barbour, ed., The Complete Works of Captain John Smith, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1986), III, 156-7.

Although Smith described his contributions to military strategy as indispensable, he was captured and for a time endured slavery in Constantinople. His experiences in eastern Europe exemplify another part of the new Atlantic frame through which we now see early colonization. In this period Europe's focus centered on the Mediterranean and the rich trades of the east that came through it. England was far removed from those centers; the poet John Donne said England was the "Suburbs of the old world."⁴ English interest in the Mediterranean was high and many people who went to America had, like John Smith, first had experience in the East. George Sandys, son of an archbishop and future official in Virginia, wrote his *Relation of a Journey Begun An: Dom: 1610. Foure Bookes Containing a description of the Turkish Empire, of Ægypt, of the Holy Land, of the Remote parts of Italy and Ilands adjoyning* (London, 1615) and this lavishly illustrated book went through many reprintings. John Winthrop, Jr., son of Massachusetts Bay's first governor, had also traveled in the eastern Mediterranean, the region Europeans called the Levant.

Some travellers had gone to Muslim-controlled lands involuntarily, as many thousands of Europeans were captured by the Barbary pirates of North Africa. Often the prisoners were seized with the ships they were riding on, but some of these pirates became so bold that they even took people from villages on the west coast of England. Many of these captives were ransomed, but some were not so lucky and remained in captivity; others chose to throw in their lot with their captors and took up a life of freebooting. They were popular figures on the London stage in such dramas as Richard Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turke: or, The Tragicall Lives and Deaths of the Two Famous Pyrates, Ward and Dansiker* (London, 1612).⁵

One well-known figure who went the other way and converted from Islam to Christianity after capture was the diplomat and traveler Al-Hasan Ibn-Muhammed al-Wazzan al-Fasi.. He lived in the household of Pope Leo X and the Pope gave him his own name at his baptism, Johannes Leo de Medici, from which he became known as Leo

⁴John Donne, [A Sermon Preached to the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantation](#), in his [Five Sermons Upon Special Occasions](#) (London, 1626), 44.

⁵Daniel J. Vitkus, ed., [Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England](#) (New York, 2000); Nabil Matar, [Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery](#) (New York, 1999); A. J. Hoenselaars, [Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: A Study of Stage Characters and National Identity in English Renaissance Drama, 1558-1642](#) (Rutherford NJ, 1992), 174-8.

Africanus. John Pory, who went to Virginia and as colony secretary reported on the first meeting of the Virginia general assembly in 1619, had earlier translated and published Leo Africanus's work as *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (London, 1600). On the title page he wrote that the work had been "written in Arabicke and Italian by Iohn Leo a More, borne in Granada, and brought up in Barbarie." Leo's family was among the Muslims who had been forced out of Spain and into North Africa in the *Reconquista*.

When Europeans wrote about America's people and flora and fauna, they often compared them to Old World models. Indian dress was likened occasionally to Irish, and American worship was sometimes analogized to Irish or Turkish ceremonies. New Englander William Wood, for example, wrote of American ideas of the immortality of the soul and said on this topic "Indian faith jumps much with the Turkish Alchoran."⁶ Many writers called maize Turkey wheat or Guinea wheat. Such references, far from just lumping together the foreign as simply exotic, actually relied on widespread knowledge about the East and Islam and placed America within the spectrum of the known.

An Atlantic approach alters the cast of New World characters on whom historians focus. The colonial governors still occupy their places, but they share the stage with the men and women who acted between the settlements and tied the system together. The margins become at least as important as the traditional centers. In the colonial setting what happened at the margins where representatives of various European and American groups interacted was probably more important than what went on in the little villages that served as colonial capitols. Thus the picture is closer to a reality that participants would recognize. Another result of this focus is that American Indians and a slowly growing number of African actors assume much larger and more important places in the story we have to tell.

Historians have recognized for a long time that the English colonies would have failed miserably, as many did, if powerful Indian nations had not decided to allow them to settle and to keep them alive during the early years. The Americans among whom the English first planted, both in Chesapeake Bay and in New England, had had long experience of Europeans and understood well their strengths and weaknesses; they were

⁶ Wood, *New Englands Prospect*, 93

participants in the Atlantic world before colonization. Some of them, Squanto in New England and Paquiquineo from the Chesapeake region, a man who is usually known by the baptismal name the Spanish gave him, Don Luís de Velasco, had lived in Europe before being returned to their native locales. Other Indians had also traveled back and forth across the Atlantic.

Indians living on America's east coast participated in long-distance trade networks spanning the eastern half of the continent, and the successful European newcomers plugged into those networks. The Roanoke leaders who met Raleigh's colonists in the mid-1580s were wearing badges made of copper from the Lake Superior region. Captain John Smith, on an exploring voyage from Jamestown, met representatives of the powerful Susquehannock tribe who indicated their interest in establishing a trade relationship with the colonists. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Susquehannocks had moved three hundred kilometers south from their original site on the Susquehannah River, where they had occupied scattered small villages, and built one great fortified town near the head of Chesapeake Bay in order to situate themselves better for transatlantic trade---and all this happened decades before Jamestown was founded.⁷ Some native people, like some Europeans, were prepared to see and take advantage of the possibilities offered by new transatlantic connections.

Even as the English colonies became established, the newcomers continued to trade in native-produced commodities. The beaver pelts that were so highly valued by European hatmakers for the fine glossy felt that could be produced from them were procured and processed by native hunters, and they were brought to the coast along Indian-controlled trade routes. Among the goods that were exchanged for the pelts the most valuable to the Indians was wampum, beads that played a key spiritual role in native life that were fashioned from quahog shells found in some locations along the east coast. Thus the Europeans to some extent played a middleman role in trades between American Indian polities conducted in native commodities; and for Indians who lived further inland one immediate result of the European presence and demand for furs was greater access to

⁷ James W. Bradley, Evolution of the Onondaga Iroquois: Accommodating Change, 1500-1655 (Syracuse, 1987), 83, 90-9. See also Francis Jennings, "Glory, Death, and Transfiguration: The Susquehannock Indians in the Seventeenth Century," in Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 112 (1968), 15-53.

an American commodity that they very much desired.

Fish from the Newfoundland Banks and beaver pelts were among the first commodities that Europeans received from North America. Maize and sweet potatoes joined fish as major food imports and may have supported the population explosion Europe was experiencing; cassava from South America became a staple food crop in Africa. But most of the trades on which the Atlantic world was built dealt in luxuries, items that Europeans, Indians, or Africans wanted but did not need. Furs were soon joined by tobacco from the Chesapeake region, and tobacco was among the first consumer crazes. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, smoking (drinking smoke in the parlance of the times) was an expensive luxury available only to the wealthy few. By the 1620s Virginia was exporting 500,000 pounds per year and it had become an item of mass consumption in just two decades. In the course of the early modern period the same phenomenon would happen with sugar, rum, coffee, and cotton. The world was tied together by demand for new products, and people who had no direct transatlantic links became Atlantic in their consumption patterns.

Furs were exceptional; most products of America had to be produced by labor imported from the Old World, where labor was plentiful and land was in short supply. America reversed this ratio; land could be had relatively easily, but it was worth little unless its owner had the labor to work it. In the English colonies on the mainland of North America labor needs were met throughout most of the founding century by the importation of indentured servants from Europe, who served a set number of years to pay off the cost of their passage. These men and women came because they believed they would be able to get land of their own at the end of their terms of servitude, and get a stake in society far more secure than they could have achieved at home. In the Caribbean, where the available land very quickly became engrossed in sugar plantations dependent on economies of scale to be productive, servants had far less incentive to come. Quickly in the West Indies and more slowly in the southern mainland colonies, enslaved Africans became the principal labor source. English merchants entered the slave trade in the second half of the seventeenth century and the numbers of Africans imported soared. Atlantic historians are now beginning to trace with precision the African origins of people who came to America as slaves and to discern the African

forms of Christianity those from Kongo brought with them as well as the Muslim faith common to many. These interacted with traditional West African religions in the new environment to keep cultural traditions alive.

Older historical models of colonial history looked at interaction between fixed points in the Old World and in the New. The Atlantic approach recognizes the myriad ways in which the colonies were bound together and questions the stereotypes we have inherited about the differences between the regions. No longer do we treat New England, the Chesapeake, or the Lower South as hermetically sealed regions that had little to do with each other, and we do not treat the mainland colonies that eventually became the United States in anachronistic isolation. Trade in basic foods and supplies from the mainland colonies provisioned the West Indian plantations and brought money and desirable goods back to the mainland. Two of Massachusetts Bay governor John Winthrop's sons tried their hand in the Caribbean, and one lived out his life there. The elder Winthrop's correspondence is full of information about what was going on in Barbados and the other West Indian islands; he monitored events and developments with great care and assiduousness, a sure sign of his feeling that his colony's fate was bound up with theirs. Winthrop's sons were not unique; many colonists lived in more than one colonial region and brought their valuable expertise with them to new venues.

Not only does the new model see the English colonies as interconnected, it also has room to include other ventures that contributed to the future. New Amsterdam, whose site includes the land on which NYU sits, was a major Atlantic port. The Dutch were distinguished for their technological skill and their willingness to share technical knowledge for a price. Most European venturers thought in terms of secrecy and tried to keep their knowledge exclusive; the Dutch were prepared sell knowledge like other commodities. After Dutch planters, including many Sephardic Jews, were forced out of Brazil by the Portuguese in the 1640s, they came to the West Indies and taught English planters in Barbados how to grow and process sugar, creating the most advanced industrial plant in the seventeenth century. Dutch planters in New Amsterdam also trafficked in technological knowledge; the earliest picture of the village includes a windmill for draining swamp land, a technological innovation that Dutch technicians had already brought to England's fen country. It was also Dutch planters in New Amsterdam

who taught English planters in New England about wampum and its importance to their native trading partners thereby making participation in the fur trade possible.

An Atlantic approach also provides scope to include the Spanish as something more than merely the persecutors of the Indians and the enemies of the English. England's belated entry into colonization was fueled in part by their sense of themselves as leaders of the Protestant nations in Europe against the Spanish champions of Roman Catholicism. Spanish power depended on revenues from America possessions, and the English believed they needed to compete in that field. The Black Legend, the notion that Spanish society was given to bigotry and repression and that they were peculiarly rapacious and exploitative in their American plantations, was disseminated as part of the English effort to compete with them, and it has stuck ever since.

All Europeans involved in colonization had mixed records in America; American Indians everywhere suffered from their presence and the techniques they employed in meeting the labor demands of the plantations deprived many Old World people of freedom and rights. The notion that one nation was more or less benevolent either in terms of their understanding or of ours does not survive scrutiny of the record. Each colonizing group was guilty of practices that would be judged horrifying both by their contemporaries and ours. And each also conceived their plans in terms of law and religious considerations they held important.

On some levels the Spanish were much more solicitous of the Indians in the territories they claimed than the English were. Wherever they went, the friars were there, often far in advance of settlement, and they carried their missionary zeal with them. Many learned native languages and sometimes they defied their own civil and military leaders in defense of their Indian converts. Historians have long celebrated the missionary and linguistic efforts of John Eliot and the Mayhew family in New England and have ignored the more than forty missions staffed by as many as seventy Franciscans sponsored by Spanish sources throughout Florida and Georgia in the seventeenth century. Modern scholars may see missionization as cultural aggression, but it is undeniable that seventeenth-century Christians recognized the imperative to carry salvation to the heathen and that the Spanish carried out this requirement far more conscientiously than the English did.

The new Atlantic approach shows us a far more connected world in the seventeenth century than we have been accustomed to see in both hemispheres: eastern and western; and northern and southern. New scientific work has contributed materially to our understanding of this integrated Atlantic world. Historical climatology, investigating the global weather system and the course of past climate change, presents a challenging picture of the environmental conditions in which colonization took place. Based on computer readings of cores taken from glaciers, lake and ocean beds, and coral deposits, researchers have established that the creation of Atlantic connections took place in the Little Ice Age, a much colder period. Moreover, cold was exacerbated by extreme drought conditions that prevailed in much of the Americas during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mayan civilization declined in devastating drought conditions and in the Southwest, there was large-scale abandonment and consolidation of pueblos due to drought.⁸ East Africa also experienced widespread drought.⁹ In Europe Little Ice Age conditions created hardship, and one historian has connected the rise of witchcraft accusations to adverse environmental conditions.¹⁰ The Roanoke Lost Colonists abandoned their site on the Carolina coast and Jamestown's founding twenty years later in 1607 occurred in the worst drought in almost 800 years. El Niño was first recorded in the seventeenth century, and some historical climatologists think that collateral Atlantic effects of this Pacific Ocean occurrence might have been both more frequent and more severe than in modern times.¹¹ Although their understanding was limited, those involved in the Atlantic were affected by the operation of an interconnected Atlantic wind and water system that in turn linked them to global systems.

⁸ Elinore M. Barrett, Conquest and Catastrophe: Changing Rio Grande Pueblo Settlement Patterns in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Albuquerque, 2002); Paul R. Fish, Suzanne K. Fish, George J. Gumerman, and J. Jefferson Reid, "Toward an Explanation for Southwestern 'Abandonments'," in George J. Gumerman, ed., Themes in Southwest Prehistory (Santa Fe, 1994), 135-64; Swan, "Mexico in the Little Ice Age," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, XI (1981), 633-48.

⁹ Dirk Vershuren, Kathleen R. Laird, and Brian F. Cumming, "Rainfall and drought in equatorial east Africa during the past 1,100 years," Nature, 403 (2000), 410-4.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Behringer, "Climatic Change and Witch-Hunting: The Impact of the Little Ice Age on Mentalities," Climatic Change, 43 (1999), 335-51.

¹¹ David W. Stahle, et al., "The Lost Colony and Jamestown Droughts," Science, 280 (1998), 564-67 and Dennis B. Blanton, "Drought as a Factor in the Jamestown Colony, 1607-1612," Historical Archaeology, 34 (2000), 84-81; Richard Grove and John Chappell, "El Niño Chronology and the History of Global Crises During the Little Ice Age," in Grove and Chappell, El Niño: History and Crisis (Cambridge, 2000), 1-30.

Early modern technical accomplishment was greatly enhanced by new kinds of products and endeavors called forth in everything from ship construction and navigation to sugar production. Sometimes the most advanced processes were on the west side of the Atlantic; and the improvements that dazzled people were clearly associated with the emerging Atlantic world. The very first use of the neologism "technological" in print was in an Atlantic book. It occurred in 1627 in Wye Saltonstall's preface to *A Sea Grammar, With the Plaine Exposition of Smiths Accidence for young Sea-men, enlarged*, written by Captain John Smith:

Each Science termes of Art hath wherewithall

To expresse themselues, calld Technologicall.

So new was this concept that it merited an explanatory marginal note: "Technologicall, Greeke word compounded of two Greeke words . . . signifies words of Art."¹²

In many ways---from the foods they ate and the clothes they wore to the books the literate read---early modern Europeans participated in the emerging Atlantic world. Many who never left home became Atlantic citizens. Accounts that told of thrilling voyages of exploration and celebrated or deplored the exploits of venturers were read as the science fiction of the day; William Wood called the audience for such books the "mind travelling reader."¹³

¹² Barbour, ed., *Complete Works of Smith*, III, 52.

¹³ Wood, *New Englands Prospect*, title page.