PART I

The Pre-Modern World (< 1800 CE)

INTRODUCTION PART I

The Pre-Modern World (< 1800 CE)

> "Traveling – it gives you home in thousand strange places, then leaves you a stranger in your own land"
> -- Ibn Battuta (1304-1369)

World History, as the introduction indicates, is often associated with the history of globalization. Whereas this description of the field is too simple, World History does concern itself with the history of increasing global interactions and international relations. As such, the traditional and Eurocentric view of the first or true phase of globalization is one where the Columbian voyages starting in 1492 CE are seen as the starting point. Yet, as the title of this introduction to Part 1 indicates, this book

Image I.1 Ibn Batuta in Egypt

will take a different approach and sees the period before the Columbian Exchange as a significant period in the history of increasing global connections. In order to understand the current world, this early history of the developments of global populations needs to be addressed and analyzed, as during this long period the different world regions, which we identify being Africa; Central Asia; East Asia; Europe; the Middle East; North America; Pacific; Russia; South America; and South East Asia, shaped and molded their distinct local characteristics. This long period of almost five thousand years, stretching from antiquity, when significant long distance trade between developing civilizations was taking off and in part shaping local markets and identities, up to the rise of the Atlantic World and the dawn of what we call the 'Modern era', when the Americas became more closely connected to what has been called 'the Old World' consisting of Eurasia and Africa, is thus a key period to understand the present-day practices of individuals and states formulating and negotiating their regional distinctness in the process of international relations.

Nevertheless, a five thousand year long period is certainly vast, complex and not easily summarized, certainly not on a global scale. As such this book approaches World History from a contextual and thematic angle. Using thematic as well as contextual approaches allows us to understand *longue durée* developments from a local perspective and as such resists generalizations which broad universal theories can produce. This book aims to narrate and analyze long-term processes, which can be identified at different times in different places on Earth, but always respecting the local unique context in which such global phenomena occurred. We have identified a certain number of key historical processes and thematic developments which have quintessentially shaped this long stretch of time. One such theme or historical development which defined the development of human societies during this period is **Communication**, or rather, the developments of techniques of communication such as the development of writing (ca. 3000 BCE) as well as the invention of paper (ca. 200 CE) and the cultural changes which occurred due to these innovations. Writing allowed societies to more easily store vaster amounts of information for longer periods of time, and share this information across greater distances. This boom in information-sharing sparked a global cross-pollination, which triggered a rapid cultural, economic and political development.

For example, one major development during this era which is closely linked to the emergence of writing as well as the formation of distinct regional identities, was the expansion of certain world views, traditions and teachings which purported a universal message and universal truth rather than claiming authority and legitimacy based on a local source of power or tradition. This period between ca. 1000 BCE to 300 CE saw the rise of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Greek Philosophy and the monotheistic beliefs represented by Judaism. The significance of this process cannot be underestimated. Where spiritually unified communities first bonded over local rites and/or a local deity, for example a god protecting a city or a specific lake, the concept of a universal God or a universal set of life-guiding principles and rituals that could and should apply to all of humankind, allowed not only these ideas to spread more easily, but also encouraged people to help the expansion of such ideas, as it was considered both a collective quest and individual duty to enlighten all societies with the 'truth'. The "evangelization" of the world, be it in the name of for instance Confucius or Christ, created vast spheres of cultural influence, in which distant communities could experience a sense of belonging to one another based on a shared belief system or common practice of traditions.

We are of course all aware of the damage overtly zealous 'missionaries' caused on less willing recipients of these newly established belief systems. Several episodes of violent religious persecution or forced conversion come to mind, such as the 'Anti-Buddhist Proclamation' in 845 CE Tang China, the persecution of Christians in 64 CE Rome or the forced conversion of native-Americans in South America by the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors (see chapter 5). Nevertheless, it is also important to remember how the spread of only a handful of dominant belief systems created spheres of cultural homogenization that were previously unthinkable and did indeed make the world seem smaller or at least more comprehensible. The travel experiences of the globetrotter *par excellence* Ibn Battuta (1304-1369 CE) are a great example of this, as the North African traveler (see chapter 3 on the Silk Roads and Central Asia) found a home in almost every new and distant place he set foot, thanks to the shared customs of the Islamic faith in the 'Dar-al-Islam' which created a level of trust and understanding between himself and people as far apart as South-East Africa, Persia and the Indonesian archipelago. Similarly, Buddhist monasteries found along the Silk Roads served as landmarks and cultural 'refuges' where those who practiced the traditions accompanying the teachings of the Buddha could find rest and support (see chapter 3 on the Silk Roads).

This cultural homogenization based on a religious or philosophical understanding of the world, should also not be exaggerated. Local differences in the daily practice of religious and/or philosophical wisdoms account for some of the current regional cultural and political distinctness, such as for example the Burmese form of Buddhism (see chapter 6 on **Religion**) or the differences between Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholic Christianity, which were politically and theologically sealed with the 'Great Schism' of 1054 CE. One can also think of the Reformation of 1517 CE which set the Protestant Christians on a different trajectory of a theological as well as ritualistic expression of Christianity from the Roman Catholics, or the split between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims which originated with the dispute over succession of the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the Islamic faith, that led to regional differences in the expression and understanding of their religious beliefs.

The dominance of these handful of religious/philosophical world views also created the need for more powerful and clearly drafted doctrines, as well as more powerful spiritual brokers who acted as the teachers and/or intermediaries between the 'common' people and their deities or inner spiritual development. This brings us to another of the central themes in this first part of the book, namely **Political Order**. Chapter 4 shows how the religious authorities in Europe have always sought to find a balance between worldly leaders (Kings/Knights, etc.) and spiritual leaders (Priests/ Pope, etc.). Europe did not follow a divergent path at this stage in World History. The struggle between religious and worldly powers is a universal phenomenon. What made it intriguing is that it occurred in a relatively small geographical area. All other major political states at the time encompassed vast areas, think for instance of the Song Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate or the Malian Empire. These empires certainly did not portray an absolute cultural uniformity and were in many instances also ruled by local lords or kingdoms loyal to a larger empire, not unlike European feudal knights and their kings. Yet, the scale of these vassal states and their overlord's empire was still significantly larger than the scale on which such processes occurred within Europe. This fierce competition for power in such a small area, and the debate, containing so many different views and voices – about who should wield power and based on what authority – profoundly shaped the thinking on political power and state formation in this area. Additionally, these ideas would have long-term global consequences as certain principles, such as the Westphalian treaty, which evolved within the local European context, would eventually become dominant throughout the world and serve as the basis for the principles of state sovereignty in the United Nations Charter.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one central theme this part of the book will address is **Trade**. This thematic lens is arguably the most obviously connected to the process of globalization. Indeed, Chapter 3 which deals with Trade through discussing the Silk Roads also shows how the power of commerce and with that the power of desire, the appreciation of fine craftsmanship and the quest for artistic and productive innovations often proved more powerful than political orders and the enforcement of state regulations. For example, the so-called commercial revolution in Song China (960-1279 CE) led to the creation of the famous Grand Canal, the invention of gunpowder, and even the concept of paper money in the eleventh century CE. This commercial boom in East Asia helped the trade all along the Silk Roads to blossom. This period thus also sees the rise of a wealthy and relatively independent merchant class, who used their money to celebrate their success and lavishly decorate themselves and their homesteads, as such supporting the local artistic industries, as well as used their money to buy political influence, thus upsetting the political order.

This great boom of global trade, however, was severely shaken in the fourteenth century by the sudden appearance of a new bacterial infectious disease, which was to kill almost half of the entire population of the 'Old World'. The bubonic plague or 'Black Death' most likely originated somewhere in Central Asia and found through the merchant caravans and ships a way to spread rapidly to the major centres of trade and power in the entire Eurasian landmass as well as North Africa. In particular the first wave of this sudden and devastating pandemic, the likes of which the modern human population has never seen before nor since, profoundly changed societal development. It triggered religious debates on the nature of suffering and salvation amongst Christian as well as Muslim scholars. In terms of political order, people looked to their rulers for guidance and protection which most could not offer, leading for example to the end of the Yuan Dynasty, which was toppled in 1368 CE in the ensuing chaos which emerged after the plague erupted in 1331 CE. In Europe lower population numbers led to higher wages which in return led people to invest in labor-saving ways to produce food and products, starting the so-called proto-industrialization.

The Black Death was certainly not the only time biological exchanges proved crucial in the shaping of societies' futures. Chapter five for instance addresses the biological nature of the Columbian Exchange, which caused the native population of the Americas to die in great numbers due to imported diseases from the 'Old World' to which the population in the Americas had no immunity. This rapid and massive depopulation in turn brought the Spanish and Portuguese colonists to consider importing enslaved individuals from Africa to work on the newly established plantations. As early as 1493, African enslaved were forcibly shipped from the south west African coast, near present-day Angola, to be put to work in Brazil. This mass movement of peoples from across different continents coming together in the Americas caused people to reflect on who they were and how they related to one another. The Casta paintings (see chapter 5) which were produced in much of Spanish America are a clear example of the growing tendency to identify and classify people based on superficial physical traits as essential characteristics of one's being. This injurious **Race** thinking would have profound effects on the history of not only the Americas and Africa but on the whole of world history since. At the dawn of what we call the 'modern era', racist thinking had become an integral ideology in the thinking about 'the other' and would come to influence direct global encounters in the ensuing age of Industrialization, Nationalism and 'New Imperialism' (see part 2).

CHAPTER 2.

Communication: The Writing Revolution

ANNE MARIEKE VAN DER WAL

Image 2.1 San Rock Art, Cederberg Mountains, South Africa

Introduction

In 2018 in a cave at the southern tip of the African continent, scientists identified an object which changed our understanding of the development of human communication. Scientists discovered a 73,000-year-old stone, which had been 'decorated' with clear and straight lines, drawn with an ochre crayon. This object presents the first known form of intelligible communication by homo sapiens to date.[*] It shows us how our desire to leave a mark goes back to the earliest stages of human evolution. Moreover, it provides evidence that we can trace not only human evolution to Africa, but also the origins of human communication technologies. Indeed, in the

* Christopher S. Henshilwood, Francesco D'Errico, Karen L. Van Niekerk, Laure Dayet, Alain Queffelec and Luca Pollarolo, 'An abstract drawing from the 73,000-year-old levels at Blombos Cave, South Africa', *Nature*, Vol. 562 (2018) pp. 115-118.

yellow and orange rocks of the semi-arid rocky terrain of Southern Africa, countless red pigmented symbols appear on hidden and sheltered rock walls. They preserve these ancient expressive statements, transmitting information across thousands of years about the flora and fauna, which once marked the landscape. Moreover, they bear testament to the human communities who eked out an existence at the southern tip of the African continent. Such rock art has an incredible appeal to archeologists and historians, as they are beautiful and delicate primary sources of a 'prehistoric' era, as well as testimony to humanity's primordial and profound urge for meaningful communication.

The study of history is intimately connected to the study of communication, as historians are first and foremost interested in the recorded past, in the history of who we are and where we came from, and how we have narrated and recorded that process. Yet in studying the history of communication there is a tendency to focus on communication as a tool, and as such give more weight to understanding its changing speed, latency and scope rather than looking at how innovation has changed the nature and culture of communication itself. Chronological overviews, provided in history textbooks, of the major breakthroughs in the history of communication usually list technological advancements in modes of writing that have increased the magnitude of this mode of transmittance, such as the invention of writing (c. 3400 BCE); the invention of the printing press (woodblock printing c. 200 CE; Gutenberg 1440 CE); the invention of the telegraph (1844) and the invention of the internet (c. 1970 CE), and these are presented as pivotal turning points in the history of human civilization. However, there is an anachronistic element in this modern obsession of historians with written forms of communication, as it hinders our understanding of previous societies and civilizations who, for the most part of human history, despite the ability to write, were predominantly oral cultures.

Recent paleoanthropological and archeological research into the origins of meaningful communication in human societies has recognized how developments of visual symbolic communication (rock art) often developed in close collaboration with the development of acoustic expressions.

2.a Concept Definition

Meaningful Communication

The deliberate act of transferring information through a verbal (speech or writing) or non-verbal (such as drawing, movement, objects) medium.

It appears that many ancient rock art sites were either located in naturally sonorous landscapes or in caves with high levels of resonance and reverberations*, suggesting

* Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Tommaso Mattioli, 'Rock Art, Music and Acoustics: A Global Overview', in: Bruno David and Ian J. McNiven (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Rock Art* (Oxford:

that the performance of acoustic sounds was equally important for early human societies to transmit information as the more tangible signs left on the rock walls. Moreover, evidence of the abundance and importance of these non-textual or non-tangible forms of communication can also be clearly seen in these ancient rock art drawings themselves. The rock painting shown in image 2.1 depicts human figures who seem to dance, and where there is dancing there is music and/or singing, an integrated and complex form of human communication. Several historians, notably Global Historians William McNeill & John R. McNeill, have argued that more collaborative acts of communication, such as singing and dancing, were fundamental for the evolution of human civilizations.* This idea was already expressed in the mid-nineteenth century by the 'father of evolution' himself, Charles Darwin, who speculated in his book *The Descent of Man*, that "We must suppose that the rhythms and cadences of oratory are derived from previously developed musical powers. We can thus understand how it is that music, dancing, song, and poetry are such very ancient arts. We may go even further than this, and [...] believe that musical sounds afforded one of the bases for the development of language" (1871).** One can easily imagine how call and response singing techniques, found in many folk music across the globe, or the focus and collaboration required for keeping rhythm and time during exertive synchronized movements such as group dances, are what strengthened the bonds between kinsmen, villagers and even larger social groups.

The wish to communicate and the evolution of tangible and intangible communication modes is what has shaped the progress of our species as social animals. To be able to converse and make ourselves intelligible to one another is what has helped us collaborate and cement social cohesion. Thus, in understanding the rise of human civilizations, we need to simultaneously look at the development of communication and the reasons why certain more 'primary', such as non-written, modes of communication continued to be used. It is after all not only the story of the past that should interest us but also how the story is told and how we came to use certain communicative ways to shape and narrate those stories that bind us.

The history of Africa provides a logical starting point in this search for the meaning of modes of communication and its connection to the development of human civilizations, as the region is seen as 'the cradle of human kind' as well as part of what is known as the 'fertile crescent' where most of the earliest civilizations and written scripts developed. This chapter will look at different cultures of communication and how they have shaped the development of several key civilizations in the history of Africa, notably Ancient Egypt and the Sahelian Empire of Mali, as well as our modern understanding of these historical states. Both

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Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 503-528.

* William McNeill and J.R. McNeill, *The Human Web. A Birds Eye View of World History* (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 13.

** Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1872), p. 572.

these ancient societies provide an interesting case study in which written language had evolved to a very high level, yet, oral communication remained central in the day-to-day activities of these societies, not unlike our modern societies today. The main argument of this chapter is that the oral recounting of history forms a long standing pattern in human societies and forms an important entry point in the understanding of human connections and the human relationship to history.

Historiography

Storytellers, Oral Literature & the Revolution of Writing

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of transmitting complex information. Stories to make sense of the natural world, to transmit experiences and skills, and stories about social groups and their ancestry. These oral traditions about our ancestral heritage are the earliest forms of history, the practice of narrating past events and providing meaning and significance for those people and events that came before.

2.1 The Study of History

Oral History

The study of history through orally transmitted sources. Historians distinguish between sources which are part of an oral tradition and the field of Oral Literature, such as epic poetry or folklore, and oral sources which recount only a one generational/individual memory of certain historical events. Such life stories and interviews are recorded after the historical events have occurred, and as such provide a testimony of both the past and the present. At the same time, they offer historians evidence of otherwise undocumented events or perspectives.

Early 'historians' were thus master storytellers. They were charged with preserving the living and distant memories of a people. At the same time, such stories about the past were used to justify certain societal structures and values. What binds us as a group? What are the cultural norms which we adhere to? What justifies the authority of those in power? As these genesis traditions, normative narratives or stories about royal lineages were both lengthy and important and memory strategies were used to make sure the storytellers could remember crucial information and faithfully transmit this. Such strategies were mostly stylistic adaptations, such as formulaic composition, alliteration and ring composition.* As such, these ancient stories about the past became forms of literature, oral literature, in which fact and

* Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1960/2000). John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition. History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

myth became entangled. Examples of this can be found in some of the earliest known oral traditions, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh (written down c. 2100 BCE) and already mentioned in the introductory chapter; the Indian Rig Veda (c. 1500-1200 BCE) or the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers (c. 1200 to 1194 BCE) and the Iliad and Odyssey (fall of Troy c. 1260–1180 BCE; publication of the Epic c.800–700 BCE).

The emergence of writing provided new ways to record and share information. Many linguistic historians expect that the early written languages, which emerged independently in different locations across the world, developed predominantly out of a need for counting and calculating. For example, the earliest known form of writing, the Sumerian cuneiform (see also chapter 1), seemed to have developed predominantly from accounting systems more than 5000 years ago.[*] Writing thus initially served the purpose of recording numbers in a very meticulous and indisputable way, which made long distance trade or tax collections, especially through third parties, easier and more reliable. These archaic scripts like cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphs (see image 2.2) were thus not immediately used for recording authoritative texts on religion or philosophy, as is often imagined, but were rather used for more mundane but nonetheless important purposes like recording ownership or values of goods.[**] Nevertheless, the revolution that written languages caused was the change in thinking about recording and disseminating information.

This orality-literacy shift was one of the most profound cognitive revolutions in human history, as it changed the way we think and remember. In practice, it meant, among other things, that expressions of thought went from, for example being predominantly participatory, as communication was mostly uttered in the presence of other people, to becoming more internalized and 'distanced' with regards to time, space and community. This change caused expressions of information to become more eternalized but at the same time also disconnected from immediate feedback.[***] The Greek philosopher Plato warned that writing "weakens and destroys memory".[****] And several Griots, professional storytellers and keepers of African history, have pointed out that whereas "other peoples use writing to record the past, [...] this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past anymore, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice".[*****] This 'revolution' was, however, one of slow pace, as writing did not take over all aspects of significant communication, nor immediately erode the status and authority of the spoken word. Indeed, Plato also noted, referring to

[*] Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

[**] Toby Wilkinson emphasises the importance of writing for the economic management for early pharaohs, in his work *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt. The History of a Civilization from 3000 BC to Cleopatra* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 55.

[***] Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982/2005)

[****] Plato's dialogue Phaedrus 274c-277a.

[*****] Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté cited in: D. T. Niane and Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, *Sundiata. An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Pearson, 2006).

Socrates words, that “he who [...] believes that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person”.*

Image 2.2 Proto-Hieroglyphs

Herodotus, by many still considered as the ‘father of history’ in the Western tradition, used oral sources throughout his work, and prided himself on having first account oral testimonies to give his work more credibility. He was as such practicing a field of history that we today would call ‘Oral History’. Moreover, several scholars have suggested that Herodotus’s famous work *The Histories* (c. 430 BCE) was in fact composed as an oral performance for the purpose of public lectures, and only later written down in book form.** This shows that in the late Iron Age, written transmissions of historical information were certainly not deemed more reliable than oral communication. Similarly, Sima Qian (145 BCE – 86 CE), the Chinese ‘father of history’ equally attached tremendous value to oral sources such as proverbs, folk tales and poems which he collected during his travels throughout China and used for writing his all-encompassing history of China and masterpiece *Shi Ji* (Historical Records).*** In the same fashion, the North-African historian Ibn Khaldun (1332 CE –1406 CE) based much of his writing on information received through oral traditions and interviews. In his celebrated collection of books called the *Kitāb al-ʻibar* (Book of Lessons), Khaldun demonstrates one of the first recorded instances of historicist thinking when he argues for understanding the past as strange and different from

* Plato’s dialogue Phaedrus 274c-277a.

** William A. Johnson, ‘Oral Performance and the Composition of Herodotus’ “Histories”, *Journal of Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1994) pp. 229-254.

*** Yang Li-Wen, ‘Oral History in China’, *Oral History*, Vol. 15, No.1 (1987), pp. 22-25.

the present. He warns historians of too eagerly believing historical narratives that are rooted in the present, stating that (oral) narratives of, for example, royal genealogies are: "For a pedigree [...] something imaginary and devoid of reality. Its usefulness consists only in the resulting connection and close contact".* At the same time, for Khaldun this source critique applied to both oral as well as written sources. He saw no difficulty in accepting oral accounts as primary sources, under the condition that the author would be committed to apply source critique in analyzing these sources. As such, written and oral accounts were considered to be equally valuable.

Historism, Written Communication & the Concept of Civilization

Despite the continuing importance of oral traditions, the emergence of writing has become intertwined with our modern understanding of the rise of civilizations (for definition, see chapter 1). Most textbook definitions of civilization integrate a reference to written language, and as such become normative devices through which our perception of previous oral cultures is negatively influenced. In fact, definitions of civilization are in more ways normative and problematic, as they are often presented as clear and static binary opposites such as civilized and uncivilized; cultured vs. uncultured; urban vs. rural; sedentary vs. nomadic; state vs. stateless, etc. Scholars have pointed out that many of these dichotomies, for instance the division between democratically or autocratically organized societies or the urban-rural dichotomy, are problematic as they assume, for example, that only democratic city dwellers are civilized and in effect more autocratic rural societies are not. This divisionism is not a modern phenomenon; ancient societies were similarly keen on mirroring themselves to others who they usually regarded as lesser developed. In the process, they elevated their own society to the highest level of civilization. Think of the dichotomy of Greek vs. Barbarian, or Chinese vs. the Sìyí 四夷.

For early historians the focus on writing became dominant in thinking and writing about what constitutes a civilization. Writing became associated with a higher level of thinking. Early western scholars distinguished between 'prelogical' or magical vs. 'logical' cultures or civilizations, instead of distinguishing simply between predominantly oral vs. literate societies.** This negative assessment of 'non-literate' societies became more dominant with the professionalization of the historical discipline in the nineteenth century, and the development of methodological doctrines such as the Rankean school of Historicism (see chapter 1). Since then, the historical discipline has come to focus predominantly on the recorded (written) human past. All human history that could only be reconstructed based on non-written evidence became classified as 'prehistoric' and became the

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* Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah an Introduction to History*, trans Franz Rosenthal, 3 volumes (New York: Pantheon, 1958), I 265. Cited in: Ralph A. Austen and Jan Jansen, 'History, Oral Transmission and Structure in Ibn Khaldun's Chronology of Mali Rulers', *History of Africa*, Vol. 23 (1996), pp. 17-28, p. 17.

** Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 29, 59.

field of archeologists and (paleo)anthropologists. Oral sources were left out of the professional study of history for a considerable amount of time, and this meant in practice that those societies that had preserved the story of their past through oral communication were neglected and ultimately seen to be 'people without history'*.

It was this legacy, among others, that led to the devaluation of oral cultures and in particular of African History. Some western historians of the nineteenth century went so far as to dismiss the African origins of early civilizations such as Ancient Egypt. The German philosopher Hegel for example infamously wrote:

> "[Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it-that is in its northern part-belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit".**

Such obvious biased and dismissive interpretations of non-Western and non-'literate' histories cast a long shadow on the field of African history, as well as on the interpretation of what it meant to be 'civilized'.

The Cultural Turn and the Rediscovery of Oral Sources

In the later decades of the twentieth century, a shift occurred within the historical discipline and other fields in the Humanities that placed culture and the ordinary lives of people at the center of investigation as well as moving from a more positivist epistemology that aimed to understand and study the past in a completely neutral and objective manner, to a post-modern understanding of knowledge production and scientific enquiry.

2.2 The Study of History

Epistemology

The approach to knowledge and how to arrive at it, taking into account its foundations, methods, and validity.

2.b Concept Definition

Culture

The ideas and practices that award meaning to activities in human societies.

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* Eric Wolff, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

** G.F.W. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1892) p. 99.

Exemplary for this focus on culture as well as attention for discourse and meaning, is the work by communication specialists Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan. These scholars highlighted how not only was the content of the message important, but also that the chosen medium through which a message is communicated is equally part of that message and worthy of study.* Additionally, both scholars argued that the technologies used for communication changed the nature of communication and changed our cultures. Several (modern) cultures retain, what Ong calls, a 'secondary orality residue' as opposed to a primary orality found in non-literature societies. This persistence of oral communication is seen as more deliberate and self-conscious**, and continues to thrive as sound. In particular, the human voice presents such a powerful and experiential acuteness and connectedness that almost all literate societies still favor oral communications. Even today in our highly literate societies, we prefer hearing human voices over mere textual communication as becomes evident from the continuing success of radio, podcasts and vlogs.

Emancipatory movements in the twentieth century had their effect on the historical profession, as newly independent countries in, among others, Africa sought to retell their own histories from a postcolonial perspective. The study of oral sources, which were seen as untainted and authentic African voices as opposed to the colonial narratives in the written conventional accounts of colonial archives, became more popular. Several historians as well as anthropologists paved the way for contemporary historians by developing methodologies for the use of oral traditions as well as creating collections of transcribed traditions for future researchers. The Malian historian Hampâté Bâ gave voice to the tremendous fervor that was felt by these historians during the last decades of the twentieth century to save and collect as much information before it would be lost to 'modern life' when he stated that "Every time an old man dies in Africa, it is as if a library has burnt down" ("En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle").***

Communication in African History

Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt is probably one of the most enigmatic of all early human civilizations. From its beginnings in the third millennium BCE until its final collapse under Roman occupation in 641 CE, this mighty civilization persisted for over 4000 years and during this long stretch of time it had a tremendous influence on all its neighbors, ranging

* Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964).

** Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (2005), 133.

*** Amadou Hampaté Bâ, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul: Mémoires, 1900-1991* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1992).

from the ancient Greeks, Assyrians, the Berbers and the Nubian Kingdom. Several African scholars, notably the Senegalese historian Cheick Anta Diop, have argued that ancient Egyptians were ethnically sub-Saharan African, and their civilization the quintessence and archetype of all African cultures that followed, and, as such, was what Ancient Greek and Roman civilization is for most Western cultures.[*] This claim is, however, disputed by other African scholars for being too Nilocentric, as well as by contemporary scholars of genetics and archeology who have concluded that due to numerous large scale migrations and imperial conquests ancient Egypt can be rather defined as a multiethnic, multilinguistic Afro-Asiatic state.[**]

From a geographical and topographical point of view there is of course no denying that Ancient Egypt was a civilization situated in Africa and thus an African civilization. Scholars agree that Ancient Egypt's power and wealth was largely based on the life-giving might of the river Nile. The Egyptian control over water supplies and hydration of agricultural lands through basin irrigation was perhaps not as complex as the water engineering projects of the Indus Valley or Mesopotamia, the two other major early civilizations, but the reliability, sheer volume and might of the Nile made Egypt the most durable civilization the world has ever seen. With the annual flooding of the Nile, predominantly caused by monsoon rainfalls in the mountains of Ethiopia, the river left fertile mud behind on its banks, stretching sometimes a hundred meters inland, transforming an otherwise arid desert land into a lush green strip stretching down all the way from the Great Lakes in Central Africa and the Ethiopian highlands towards the Nile Delta in 'Lower Egypt' on the Mediterranean coast, with an incredible length of 6,650 km. So important was the Nile to Egyptian civilization, that the calendar was based on its seasonal tides. There were three seasons, *Akhet*, the period of flooding; *Peret*, the sowing season; and *Shemu*, the harvest season.

Thanks to these annual inundations, Ancient Egypt featured two important elements of an advanced and complex social organization, namely a steady food supply and technological innovations. But it also had several other distinct features which historians have associated with 'civilizations', such as a clear, and often times hierarchical, social structure; a system of government and an organized religious system.

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* Cheick Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974).

** See for a detailed discussion on ethnicity in ancient Egypt, for example: Juan Carlos Moreno García, 'Ethnicity in Ancient Egypt: An Introduction to Key Issues', *Journal of Egyptian History*, Vol. 11, No. 1-2 (2018), pp. 1-17.

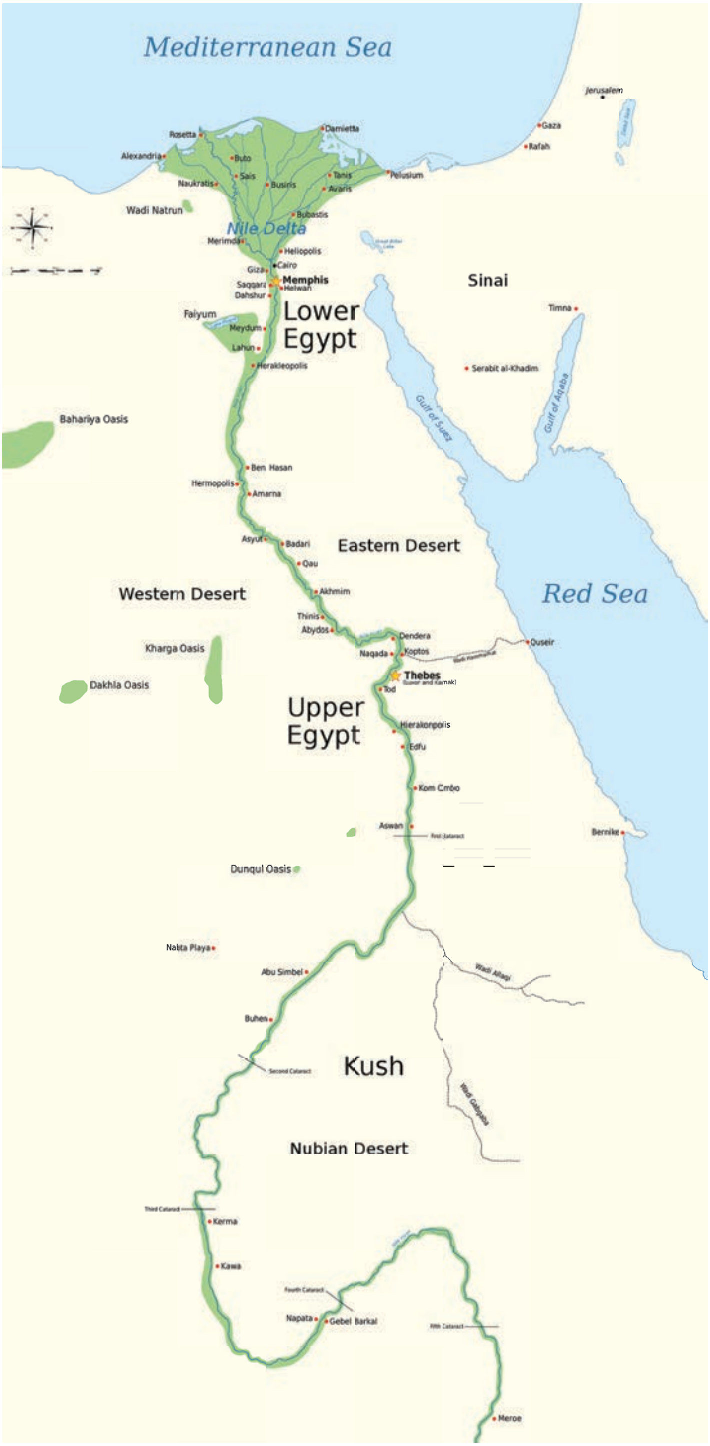

Image 2.3 Map of Ancient Egypt

In addition, ancient Egypt of course also featured that other typical but by no means conditional element of what constitutes a classic 'civilization', the development of writing. The origins of the Hieroglyphic script dates back to the fourth millennium BCE, and scholars assume it developed out of a need for tax administration. Small labels with pictorial information on them (see image 2.2) have been discovered by archeologists, who assume these labels were used for keeping track of paid tax *in natura*, and the pictorial symbols referred to both the products stored and the regions from which they came. These proto-writing symbols developed into the more complex script of Hieroglyphs.

The expansion of a writing culture and corpus of literary texts in ancient Egypt developed through the practice of writing down so-called 'mortuary texts', being chants and ritual procedures for funerals, as *aide-mémoire*.* These written texts never replaced the oral performances, but over time developed into the dominant authority on which scribes and priests came to rely. Scribes (see image 2.4) were the professional class of skilled workers charged with decorating temple walls and recording and copying moral and religious texts as well as tax collections.

Image 2.4 Seated Scribe, New Kingdom, 1391-1353 BCE

* Antonio J. Morales, 'Text-building and Transmission of Pyramid Texts in the Third Millennium BCE: Iteration, Objectification, and Change', *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* Vol. 15, No. 2 (2015), pp. 169-201.

The image of the scribes represents the well-known Egyptian hankering for immortality. The drive to preserve the body through mummification, to preserve a faithful image of an individual through visual art and to preserve the memory of an individual by a written record of his or her name and deeds, showed the Egyptian quest for and obsession with a state of permanence and eternity in the present and in the afterlife.

In modern imagination scribes are often represented as the bearers of high Egyptian civilization, but there is a debate among Egyptologists whether scribes should indeed be seen as part of the elite of Egyptian society. For example, Chloé Ragazolli has noted that as opposed to seeing them as the absolute elite and part of the aristocracy, this class of skilled workers formed an intermediary elite, as they held the key to a body of knowledge that sustained and legitimized the Egyptian state.[*] As the legitimacy of the Pharaoh, who was deemed a divine ruler, depended on the preservation and continuation of religious rites, which in turn had become increasingly dependent on writing, scribes played an essential role in maintaining the socio-political status-quo. This made them relatively powerful people within Egyptian society. Alternatively, Massimiliano Pinarello has argued that our modern perception of literacy being the prime marker of social distinction is a misconception and based on an anachronistic appraisal of Egyptian culture.[**] Scribes were first and foremost artisans, charged with a specific purpose, and as such part of the 'middle class' that consisted of free men (as opposed to the enslaved) who worked in the fields, in construction or as artists such as architects and painters. At the same time, literacy was essential for certain top offices in the state bureaucracy and the best way to ensure access to and close contact with those in power.[***] Yet, scribes worked in very diverse positions with different levels of social status, ranging from bookkeepers for traders, administrative clerks in the army to priests copying sacred texts in temples.[****] Seeing scribes as being part of a noble 'upper class' because of their literacy comes from the same misconception of seeing literate societies as the epitome of civilization and thus illiterate cultures and illiterate people as being less civilized and lower ranked.

The slightly conscious shift from depending on oral traditions to trusting in the written word echoes, among others, from the pages of the Old Testament shared by Jews and Christians, in which the prophet Isaiah is cited to have said: "Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness" (Isaiah 30:8). At the same time, this trust in the everlasting

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* Chloé Ragazolli, *Scribes. Les artisans du texte de l'Égypte ancienne. 1550-1000* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2019).

** Massimiliano S. Pinarello, *An Archaeological Discussion of Writing Practice. Deconstruction of the Ancient Egyptian Scribe* (London: Golden House, 2016).

*** Penelope Wilson, *Sacred Signs. Hieroglyphs in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 96. Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*, 56.

**** Wilson, *Sacred Signs*, p. 96-97.

witness of the written record often went hand in hand with a trust in the ability of storytellers to keep the memory of individuals and their deeds alive, as becomes apparent from an inscription on papyrus rolls of Coptic funeral texts dating back to the second and third century CE. "A man has perished, and his corpse has become dust. [...] But writings cause him to be remembered in the mouth of the storyteller."* It is a mistake to think that ancient Egypt was predominantly a literate society. Egyptologists have pointed out that the level of literacy was relatively low, with the lowest estimates of only around 1% of society during the Old Kingdom (c. 2700–2200 BCE) and perhaps as high as 20-30% among skilled workers in the New Kingdom (c. 1570–1069 BCE), meaning that ancient Egyptian civilization remained for the most part an oral society.** Moreover, it would also be a mistake to assume that the oral traditions which continued to exist parallel to the emerging written traditions were somehow less civilized and only performed and appreciated by 'lower classes'. The orality-literary shift was gradual and did not mean a sudden and complete rejection of the more primary forms of communication, instead for most of the history of ancient Egypt literacy aided and strengthened oral traditions and vice versa.

The story of the origins of Hieroglyphs and Hieratic, a more cursive script deriving from the pictorial Hieroglyphs, and the development of literacy in ancient Egypt shows that writing did not enable the rise of complex culture, nor feature a necessity or perquisite for a society to be deemed 'civilized'; rather, it was mostly a practical adaptation and consequence of a more complex social governing structure and seems to have first and foremost been developed to aid a growing bureaucracy and increasingly integrate religious rites. In a way, the invention of writing became a 'memory trap' as societies steadily became dependent on written sources as their main storage system of information. This meant that those who had trained themselves in working with this new technology, such as scribes, eventually gained an upper hand in steering and regulating knowledge accumulation.

The Empire of Mali

What the Mediterranean sea was for several ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Greece, the Sahara proved to be, as a sea of sand and the highway of trade, for the Sahelian civilizations bordering on its shores. The word Sahel derives from the Arab word Sāḥil (ساحل) which means coast, and sums up what this region of savannah grasslands just beneath the Sahara was for the peoples living there.

* Cited in: Daniel Viktor Takacs, "Performing Eternally: Visible Signs of Oral Tradition in Ancient Egypt", in Zuzanna Augustyniak and Hanna Rubinkowska-Aniot (eds), 'The Artistic Traditions of Non-European Cultures Series, Vol. 6', *The Art, The Oral and the Written Intertwined in African Cultures*, special journal issue (2018), pp. 13-34, p. 18.

** John Baines, *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 67.

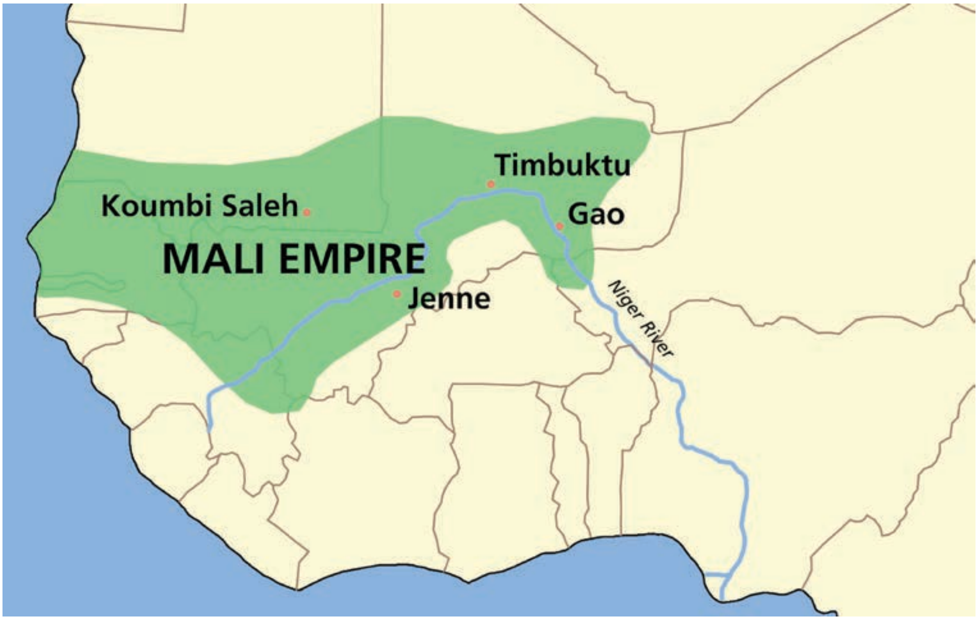

Image 2.5 Empires of Western Sudan

We often think of deserts as natural barriers, but with the domestication of the dromedary camel in the Arabian peninsula around 3000 and 2500 BCE and its subsequent spread across North Africa and the Sahel, movement across the desert became much easier and frequent. Similar also to the role of the Nile in Ancient Egypt, the river Niger functioned as the lifeline for societies in the western Sudan. Many important trading and governing cities such as Timbuktu, Djenné and Gao were along the banks of this more than four thousand kilometer long river flowing East from the Guinean highlands to the West into the Niger Delta at the Atlantic Ocean. With the exception of the inner-Delta in Mali, this river did not provide the same level of fertile silt deposits like the Nile, making farming along its banks more challenging. Yet, it was a very easily navigable river which enabled trade up and down the river with large canoes. The people of the Sahel were situated at the crossroads of trading networks that linked Sub-Saharan Africa to the rest of the then known world, and allowed them to become the intermediaries of trade between the societies in equatorial Africa and North Africa. Three consecutive empires flourished and dominated the area, the Ghana Empire (c. 300 until c. 1100 CE), the Mali Empire (c. 1235 to 1670 CE) and the Songhai Empire (1375-1591 CE).

Apart from being the middlemen for trade in salt from the North and among others kola nuts, ivory and enslaved from the South, the tremendous power and wealth of these Sahelian civilizations rested on the large gold deposits in the region. In Equatorial Africa, gold deposits were mostly found underground, and were thus very labor intensive to obtain, yet in the Sahel gold could be found in the river sediments of the Niger and could be sifted out of the river beds quite easily. Early descriptions by Arab scholars note the incredible wealth of gold that attracted and lured foreign travelers to the region. For example, the eighth century Arab scholar Ibrahim al-Fazari called (ancient) Ghana "the land of gold'.*

The decline of Ancient Ghana in the early twelfth century allowed the Keita dynasty of the Mandinka people to rise to power. Information about the origins of the Mali Empire has come to us through the oral tradition known as the Sundiata Keita. This is the key primary source for this chapter and consists of a great epic story of the founding father of the Mali Empire. It narrates the life events of the courageous 'Lion King' Sundiata of the Western Sudan who faced betrayal, exile and unexpected friendship in neighboring kingdoms which helped the young prince to reclaim his throne.

The Sundiata Keita

[...] *"We are now coming to the great moments in the life of Sundiata. The exile will end and another sun will arise. It is the sun of Sundiata. Griots know the history of kings and kingdoms and that is why they are the best counsellors of kings. Every king wants to have a singer to perpetuate his memory, for it is the griot who rescues the memories of kings from oblivion, as men have short memories".***

The Epic of Sundiata is an example of how most of the civilizations south of the Sahara narrated and preserved their history orally. The keepers of history and knowledge were Griots or Jali or Djeli (the term used by the Mande people), a class of bards and storytellers who were charged with remembering and reciting the genealogies of the royal blood lines and the oral literature of their people. Like the early 'singer of tales' of Homeric Greece or Ancient Egypt, West African Griots used memory strategies and musical aids to recount the lengthy stories about the past. As such, Griots were next to great storytellers also artists, excelling in the playing of instruments such as the *N'goni* and *Kora* (see image 2.6), types of harp-lutes, and the *Bafalon*, a wooden xylophone.

What makes the persistence of the Griots as the King's official keepers of history throughout the twelfth century up until the end of the Mali Empire intriguing, is that the Malian Empire had come to adopt writing and even came to be known as one of the leading centers of learning in the world at the time thanks to the reputation of the famous library and University of Timbuktu.

* N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (1981). Cited in: David C. Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhay* (New York: Chelsea House, 2010) p. 15.

** Niane and Mamoudou Kouyaté, *Sundiata. An Epic of Old Mali*, p. 40-42.

Image 2.6 Kora Playing Griots, Sénégal, 1900 – Colonies Françaises, Sénégal, Soudan Français

Through trade contacts and conquest, Islam had spread to North Africa in the late seventh and eighth century, and progressively reached the West African courts through contact with the merchant classes from the tenth to the fifteenth century. With Islam, the Arabic language and especially Arabic script came to be adopted in the Mali Empire. The rich kings of Mali sought to exhibit their wealth as well as new found devoutness through the patronage of (religious) scholarship. The Malian Emperor Mansa Musa (c. 1280 – c. 1337 CE) (see image 2.7), said to have been the richest man in history, became one of the main patrons of scholarship by financing the Sankoré Madrassah (school of religious learning) in the early fourteenth century, which together with the Djinguereber Madrasah built in 1327 and the Sidi Yahya Madrasah completed in 1440 CE, became part of the University of Timbuktu. The city flourished as the seat of Islamic learning in West Africa. Its Arabophone scholars used Ajami, African languages in Arabic script, to produce great texts of literature and science, thereby promoting African languages as languages of science.* At its height, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the university town boasted 25,000 students.**

* Ousmane Oumar Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

** Timbuktu, Unesco. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/119

One of the reasons for the continuing importance of oral traditions was that paper remained a very expensive and scarce item in West Africa. Whereas the technique of making plant-based paper, which had been invented in China around the first millennium CE, had rapidly spread to the Islamic world, the technique had not spread to the Muslim communities in the Sahel. They came to be dependent on paper as well as (animal skin) parchment imports from production centers in Spain and North Africa. This greatly reduced the reliance of the West African societies on paper and as such on writing. As opposed to other great Islamic centers of power in for instance West Asia, the Empire of Mali did not use paper for the bureaucratic governance of its territory. The use of paper became almost exclusively designated for theological and philosophical scholarly work, such as copying religious texts, in the newly established university.[*] Additionally, as initially only the urban merchant classes and some of the nobility had converted to Islam and the majority of the West African population, certainly those living outside the urban centers, retained their animist beliefs, there was less need for a wide adoption of writing for the purpose of studying Koranic texts. Moreover, in contrast to for example the ancient Egyptian state, the state administration of the Mali empire was very decentralized, allowing local rulers to effectively govern smaller units of people depending on oral communication, which also reduced the necessity for the state to be dependent on a written bureaucracy.

Interestingly, those religious scholars studying and working at the Madrassahs were also expected to memorize large tracts of texts and be able to recite the Quran by heart. As such, literary traditions did not replace oral traditions nor orality in science and theology. Senegalese historian Ousmane Kane argues that the ability to memorize texts by rote became a marker of scholarly excellence, a tradition that not only existed in the Sahel but throughout the Islamic world[**], as indeed becomes apparent from these following verses:

Idha lam takun hafizan wa'iyan	If retentive memory is not what you possess,
Fa-jam'uka li l-kutubi la yanfa'u	Your collection of books is quite useless,
A-tantuqu bi- l-jahli fi majlisin,	Would you dare, in company, nonsense say,
Wa-'ilmuka fil-bayti mustawda'u?	When your learning at home is stored away?[***]

Griots, who were as highly regarded as the literate scholars in university, formed the intermediaries between the converted and largely literate urban populations and the rural and largely illiterate population, bridging the two cultures through their oral literature. More so, Griots often functioned as mediators in conflict situations

* Jonathan M. Bloom, 'Paper in Sudanic Africa', in: Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (eds) *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2008) p. 45-48, 51-52.

** Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, p. 11.

*** Ibn Najjar, cited in: Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, p. 11.

as their knowledge of local histories was seen to ensure wisdom and mutual understanding.* The diverging roles of Griots and the university scholars shows the different expectations of the role and place of history in West African society, as well as an alternative to the orality-literary shift. As opposed to largely literate societies who came to write down their people's histories and as such became dependent on recorded knowledge, distant and disconnected from the lived experiences of society, the Griots sought to preserve the living memories of their people.

Image 2.7 Mansa Musa, Emperor of Mali. Catalan World Map (1375)

The praise poetry and epic stories that make up the historical narratives in the repertoire of the Griots, and the fusion of art and history that it entails, indicates that Griots and their audiences see the purpose of history mainly in its significance for the present as moral lessons and as a continuing dialogue with society to ensure acceptance and relevance for these historical narratives, as opposed to a rigorous pursuit of factual knowledge alone. As such, the persistence of Griots reminds us

* Barbara Hoffman, 'The Roles of the Griot in the Future of Mali: A Twenty-First-Century Institutionalization of a Thirteenth-Century Traditional Institution', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2017) pp. 101-122.

of one of the reasons why we as a human species started telling each other history stories in the first place a hundred thousand years ago or more.

After the destruction of the university library and the looting of many precious manuscripts by an Moroccan army in 1591, which also ended the reign of the last of the Sahelian Empires, the Songhai, local scholars who had avoided forced exile to Morocco, dedicated themselves to saving the remaining manuscripts by hiding them in their homes and under the desert sand and kept them safe throughout the following tumultuous centuries of political upheaval, colonization and the struggles for independence. Together with the oral traditions, which were much harder to eradicate or censor, these written manuscripts and oral literature continued to safeguard the accumulated knowledge on West African history.

Conclusion

The intrinsic need to communicate has led human kind to find ever more effective ways to connect and transmit and share information, from the development of language to the invention of writing and the emergence of scribes, scholars, and scientific societies who professionalized the processes of accumulating knowledge. The rise to some relative power of the first scribes in Ancient Egypt and later the scholars in Madrassahs of the Kingdom of Mali, showed that in the evolutionary trajectory of 'knowledge sharing', the written scripts had enabled human societies to increase their ability of obtaining and sharing knowledge, making the spread of religion or state bureaucracy over larger areas easier; those that had mastered the technique of writing became more important figures in society. However, the ability to communicate orally and to remember large amounts of information without the aid of the written word, remained a crucial feature of what it meant to be 'learned' and perhaps even 'civilized'. This 'secondary' or 'enduring orality' which was clearly visible in both Ancient Egypt and West African society, as well as other civilizations across the world from South-East Asia (think of the oral tradition of the Vedas) to Latin America (for example the Aztec who combined oral traditions with pictorial communication), highlights that new communication technologies never fully replace the old, but merely change the nature of the old techniques. Perhaps we are entering an age in which the new scribes of our modern society are those computer programmers who can read and write algorithms, and as such presently hold the key to the next level of 'knowledge sharing'. However, we can be assured that forms of orality will remain with us, no matter the technological advancements.

Guiding Questions

1 What did the orality-literacy shift entail?
2 How would you link the concepts of communication and 'civilization', and what are the problems scholars encounter when trying to conceptualize and describe 'civilization'?
3 How did the emergence of a class of scribes reflect the impact of writing on Egyptian civilization?
4 Why did orality continue to play an important role in the social fabric of the Mali Empire?
5 How is the double role of oral traditions, with factual historical information on the one hand and moral lessons on the other, visible in the oral epic of Sundiata Keita?

Guide to Further Reading

- Allon, Niv and Hana Navratilova (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Scribes. A Cultural Exploration* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). To understand what life was like as a scribe in ancient Egypt is the central focus in this book. Scribes were administrators or guardians of the state's religious and cultural textual traditions. The authors of this book also seek to find out what the scribe's position in society meant for ancient Egyptian ideas on meritocracy and literacy in an otherwise very traditional and hierarchical society.
- Diop, Cheick Anta, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974). This much debated and revolutionary book called into question the then dominant ideas on the supposed lack of African influences on Ancient Egyptian civilization. Diop argued that Ancient Egyptians were not only culturally influenced by sub-Saharan Africans, but were, in fact, of Sub-Saharan ethnic decent. Ironically, in his attempt to rectify the bias in Western science of seeing Egyptians as predominantly white, Diop falls into the trap of racial or ethnic essentialism himself as he insists there is one identifiable homogenous African population dominating ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, the book is considered today as a paradigm shifting publication, highlighting Africa's central place in the history of human civilizational development.
- Kane, Ousmane Oumar, *Beyond Timbuktu. An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016). In this masterfully written book, Kane argues that the great scholarly centers in West Africa, such as in Timbuktu and Djenné, not only influenced West African intellectual traditions but also the wider Islamic scholarly world. As such the book challenges the ideas that Africa did not have a scholarly tradition before colonization, and that connections between West Africa and other centers of Islamic learning were solid and long-standing.
- Okpewho, Isidore, *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). As a novelist and poet as well as literary scholar, Isidore Okpewho was one of the scholars who pioneered the field of Oral Tradition and Oral Literature

in literary studies. In this book he asserted that epic poetry as genre existed in Africa, breaking with the then dominant and Eurocentric conventions on what epic poetry entailed.

- Ong, Walter, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982/2012). This book has already become a modern classic in communication studies, as it innovatively opened up the field to consider how changes in communication media affected how individuals, as well societies as a whole, think about and value information and information sharing.
- Schmandt-Besserat, Denise, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). This book argues that writing evolved out of the need for accurate accounting, and thus evolved in symbioses with mathematics. As such the author illuminated how early scripts, such as the cuneiform script, were the cultural evolutionary consequence of humanity's shift from a hunter-gatherer life to a sedentary farming society.
- Vansina, Jan, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1985). Part of the UNESCO History of Africa editorial board, Vansina's scholarly work engages with questions about how to decolonize the sources and narratives of African History. This revolutionary book greatly aided this ambition, influencing generations of historians to consider and use alternative sources such as Oral Traditions.

CHAPTER 3.

Trade: The Ancient Silks Roads

RICHARD T. GRIFFITHS

Image 3.1 Catalan Atlas Silk Road caravan (detail)

Introduction

It is impossible to remove the association of the ‘silk road’ with the image of a ‘camel train’. Owen Lattimore, an American scholar of Central Asia, travelled in one in 1926 and his account allows us to reconstruct how they operated. At the bottom end of the scale there would be traders in the train owning two or three camels (and possibly a horse for themselves) rising at the top to those owning many times that number. They would combine into ‘trains’ for reasons of safety and benefits of scale. The camel train would typically be led by a camel leader, in charge of all the decisions affecting the train, a camel master in control of all of the personnel and one or two accountants in charge of all expenditure. Assisting the camel master would be several scouts, usually on horseback, who would survey the ground ahead looking for dangers and for suitable foraging areas. At the front of the train would be the cook and his assistants. The rest of the personnel would be the pullers, each in charge of a line of 18 camels. These pullers would work in pairs so that two men would be responsible for loading and unloading two rows of camels, with baggage outside them for protection. The individual merchants, if they were there, would ride with their lines either on a horse or on one of the camels. All of the men (and they usually were all men) would dine together and sleep in tents in the same area. A camel train would typically comprise 200-300 camels, though it would not be unusual for two (or even three) trains to travel together – more than that, and it would overtax the water and grazing available whenever they stopped. A typical journey could be as much as several thousand kilometers and take several months, fitted into that short period between the freezing winters and the scorching summers. After resting for several months and feeding up the camels, they would make the return journey.

The Start of the Silk Roads

Trade and exchange has existed almost everywhere since the Bronze Age, based on specialization and needs. Typical was that between pastoral and settled agricultural societies, which persisted in regions of semi-arid grasslands and small urban settlements at their edge. The first long-distance exchange started some 4500 years ago between the city of Ur (in present-day Iraq) and the Indus valley, a distance by sea of some 2000 km. That specific trade was abandoned around 1600 BCE after the defeat of Samaria and the drying up of the Indus river. Trade, however, persisted. In 1993 scientists examining a mummy of a 30-50 year-old female found in the 'workers' burial site in Thebes, Deir el Medina, discovered traces of fabric in her hair. Using infra-red studies, they ascertained that the fabric was indeed silk, probably Chinese in origin. Further tests showed the same level and characteristics of amino-acids in the hair and silk, thereby eliminating the possibility of contamination or that the silk had been added later. The mummy was assigned to the twenty-first dynasty, approximately 1000 BCE. The silk had probably made its journey by land and sea to India and then made the crossing by sea to the Red Sea. Trade links between the Egyptian empire and India had already been established when the Romans conquered the country in 30 BCE. They almost immediately built a large merchant fleet to exploit that trade route and develop the Red Sea port of Berenice. Excavations of the site continue to reveal large quantities of pepper corns as well as frankincense and fine Indian silverware and pottery. It provides an idea of the sea-trade in those years. Indeed, most of the 'silk road' traded goods, such as cinnamon, myrrh, pepper, and silk reached Rome by sea either through Red Sea port cities, followed by a 380 km caravan trek to the Nile, and 760 km from there to the Mediterranean. An alternative route was to ports in the Persian Gulf and a

1,400 km caravan journey through the Syrian desert to Antioch, passing through the Roman city of Palmyra.

The expansion of the Roman Empire provided the final link in a chain of large land empires that spanned most of the Eurasian continent – the Han Empire of China, the Kushan Empire and the Parthian Empire that provided the conditions of (relative) peace and stability that allowed trade and exchange to flourish. Silk was, by then, becoming part of that trade. Excavations are also yielding promising discoveries at the Chinese end of the route. The excavation of the 'Hanging Spring' post- and relay-station near the Chinese oasis town of Dunhuang uncovered thousands of documents written on strips of bamboo. Written between 111 BCE and 107 CE they showed the existence of a network of such relay stations placed at intervals of about 40 km along the route from the capital Chang'an (present-day Xián). Travelers along the route were documented at each stop. Most of the travelers came as part of 'official' delegations, as part of a tribute trade system, but undoubtedly private merchants also attached themselves to such parties. Among the merchants, the Sogdians were already prominent. The Sogdians were of Eastern Iranian origins and originally inhabited an area broadly congruous with present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, specifically in the region around Samarkand. They were a nomadic people and formed much of the itinerant merchant class operating along the Eurasian trade routes. When Emperor Wu opened up China to trade with the west, Sogdian merchants started entering the country and settling in the neighboring villages and towns across the border. There was almost no mention of caravans, and no mention of silk. Yet silk has clearly been a much sought-after fashion accessory in ancient Rome. We will return to this paradox later in this chapter.

The 'Silk Road(s)' was the label coined in the nineteenth century by the German archaeologist Ferdinand von Richthofen to the network of paths and tracks that formed the overland trade routes between China and Europe which emerged in the first century CE and lasted, sporadically, for the next 1500 years. These Silk Roads can be seen as communication, while along the routes ideas travelled, together with people and goods.

3.a Concept Definition

Silk Roads

Concept used to describe the trade routes connecting, via land and sea, Asia, Europe and Africa.

The Silk Roads concept was revived in recent years in two speeches by President Xi Jinping, as a metaphor to support a new Chinese foreign policy, described as the largest infrastructure project the world had ever seen, involving the expenditure of trillions of dollars in foreign projects. In China it is known as 'One Belt One Road'

(一带一路) but Chinese officials prefer the term 'the Belt and Road Initiative' (which de-emphasizes implication of 'one and only' in the original) for use outside China. The Belt was envisaged as economic belts linking China (originally) with other countries on the Eurasian landmass. Later the scope of the initiative was widened to cover the whole world, which rather weakened the effect of the metaphor. China would finance and help build roads and railways, airports and power plants, and special enterprise zones. Moreover, China would promote and facilitate the movement of goods and peoples across national and geographical borders. The twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road is its waterborne equivalent.

The two references neatly frame the periods of Chinese involvement in this Eurasian trading network. In the first speech, in September 2013, President Xi recalled the decision of Emperor Wu, founder of the Han dynasty and today famous for the terracotta army guarding his tomb, in 137 BCE to send an envoy into the western territories to secure an alliance against the Xiongnu people of the northern steppes who were threatening his realm. The envoy was captured (twice) and returned only seventeen years later without the alliance, but with stories of a vast trading network stretching ever westward, generating immense wealth for the peoples involved. This marked the first Chinese engagement in a trade route that reached the heart of the Roman Empire. The second speech recalled the seven voyages ordered by the third Ming Emperor Yongle into the western oceans between 1405 and 1433 CE. All the voyages passed through South East Asia and reached Southern India. In the last three, the fleet split up and sailed as far as Arabia, and possibly the east coast of Africa. These voyages, with huge fleets of over 300 vessels (some, the largest ever built) were a cross between diplomatic and trading missions, with the odd anti-piracy operation and foreign intervention thrown in for good measure. Diplomatic relations were established, gifts were exchanged and goods traded on the side. After the final voyage, the Chinese turned inwards, overseas trade was forbidden and, officially at least, the 'maritime silk road' came to an end.

In Europe, much of the focus of interest in China's Belt and Road has been in the freight trains travelling along railway links connecting China and Europe via Kazakhstan (and later Mongolia) and Russia. A shipping container can make the journey in 12-14 days instead of a month or more by sea. The route has expanded dramatically from its start in 2011 to a total of 8,225 trains (in both directions) in 2020. Each train is capable of carrying 82 standard (twenty foot) containers. Making the very generous assumption that all trains are fully loaded and that no containers are empty, that would mean that in 2019 the China-Europe freight trains carried 725,000 standard containers. This may seem impressive, but it needs to be put into context. In 2019 Asia-Europe long-distance seaborne container trade amounted to 24.7 million standard container equivalents. It is true that this figure includes shipping from Korea and Japan, but it would be difficult to argue that rail carries more than five per cent of long-distant trade.

The main argument of the chapter is that the Silk Roads have been very important routes of exchange. While the overland routes have triggered our imagination and scholarly interest, it has been long-distance trade by sea has been more important. Unfortunately, it is relatively neglected by the academic literature.

Historiography: Framing Narratives of the Past

The traditional view of the history of the Silk Roads was shaped by historians writing at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They focused on great powers shaping history and assigned a pivotal role to Central Asia. Writing in 1904, when Central Asia formed part of the 'great game' of imperial powers vying for influence and control, Halford Mackinder in his *Democratic Ideals and Reality* from 1904, developed his idea that the geographical pivot of history revolves around control over the heartland – 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland, who rules the Heartland commands the World Island, who rules the World Island commands the world'.

3.b Concept Definition

The Great Game

Concept used to describe the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires in the nineteenth century over control of the central Asian landmass.

This approach of writing history through the lens of great and powerful empires, as also discussed in the introductory chapter, is still present today.* Let us take a quick look at this traditional chronology.

The first phase of expansion dates from the expansion of the Roman Empire. This provided the final link in a chain of large land empires that spanned most of the Eurasian continent – the Han Empire of China, the Kushan Empire and the Parthian Empire. This phase of Silk Roads trade flourished until sometime from the start of the third century CE (when the Han Empire collapsed) and the early fourth century (when the Roman Empire began to retreat). Of course, trade did not collapse. Sources of certain goods may have diminished and overland routes may have become more dangerous. However, more local and regional trades will have continued and sea routes will have provided alternative channels of exchange of goods and cultures.

The growth phase of the overland occurred under the influence of the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate (749-945) and by the increasing prosperity of China under the

* Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Tang Empire (618-907 CE). The Byzantine Empire afforded a connection to the final link into the Mediterranean. Bulk trade in silk now played a far lesser role than it (ever) had before. This was because as early as the sixth century CE, silk worm larvae had been smuggled into the Roman Empire and the Persians had also mastered the techniques of silk production. Silk thread, rather than cloth, was increasingly shipped to India where it was incorporated into different fabrics, such as damask. The collapse of the Tang Empire and the fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate curtailed the growth of long-distance overland trade. Nevertheless, in the South of China, from the early tenth century CE maritime trade rapidly increased in importance, but now with pottery as a main bulk export item.

The third period of Silk Roads prosperity occurred in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This coincided with the rise and expansion of the Mongol Empire whose conquests led to a Pax Mongolica over much of the traditional Silk Roads, facilitating trade and travel along many of these routes. However, the importance of the land routes declined again after the break-up of the Timurid Empire in the mid-fifteenth century CE.

An alternative to the traditional 'great powers' interpretation is offered by the Marxist analysis of the world economy.[*] However, in Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System*[**] the old Silk Roads only played a role by creating the modern 'world system', characterized by an exploitative 'core' and an exploited 'periphery', by virtue of its collapse clearing the way for European capitalism and imperialism.

3.c Concept Definition

World System Theory

The world is divided into three sets of states depending on the role they play in economic production: Core-countries, semi-periphery and periphery countries. Core countries rely on capital intensive production and a skilled labor force, whereas periphery countries have production processes focused on labor intensive production with low-skilled workers.

This idea was challenged by André Gunter Frank and Barry Gill's *The World System: 500 years or 5000?*, which argued that an exploitative world system has existed for at least 5,000 years and that the period dismissed by Wallerstein represented an exploitative world system, one with China as the 'core'.[***]

There are other broad approaches that catch Central Asia in their scope. Notable is the environmental lens that is applied in these contributions. Jared Diamond's much criticized *Guns, Germs and Steel* argues that societies' progression from

* Marxism will be further elaborated in chapter 7.

** Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

*** André Gunter Frank and Barry Gill (eds) *The World System: 500 years or 5000?* (London: Routledge: 1994).

warring bands to sedentary civilizations was determined by environmental factors and paints a sway of common characteristics and shared development in the semi-arid belt across North Africa and Central Asia.* This ecological approach is also employed by David Christian's 'Silk Roads or Steppe Road', to demonstrate the diversity of local produce available for exchange and trade.** He also pushes the time frame of analysis back several thousand years.

Peter Turchin in 'A Theory for Formation of Large Empires' suggests that large empires emerged at the borders of regions of co-existence between nomadic pastoralist and settled agriculturalists.*** He argues that the development and expansion of large-scale empires represents 'one of the strongest macro-historical regularities over the long term', and he has identified more than 60 such 'mega-empires' in world history between 3000 BCE and 1800 CE. These territorial states with control over roughly one million square kilometers at their high point, Turchin argues, are formed through confrontation. When nomadic populations confront sedentary or settled populations, the challenge and subsequent synthesis of the two systems of social hierarchy trigger significant organizational growth and expansion. Nomadic groups have historically confronted settled agriculturalists on the edges of existing states, which frequently meant on the frontiers of steppe lands. Interactions were initially limited to nomads' attempts to appropriate or steal harvests and stored agricultural products, which led the agriculturalists to fortify both their physical defenses and internal cohesion. It became collectively necessary to invest in political organization to have any chance of warding off the nomadic threat, while the nomadic conglomerates also equivalently improved their political and military capacity to further challenge the growing power of the agriculturalists. Turchin identified three conditions for this process to occur. First, the existence of an environmental gradient, i.e. close proximity of the groups; second, the military superiority of the nomads such that they are able to attack the agriculturalists; and third, space or a deep hinterland for expansion.

3.d Concept Definition

Imperiogenesis theory

An explanation for the development of mega-empires through the confrontation between nomadic and sedentary populations, triggering a mutual reinforcing cycle of organization and confrontation.

* Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton 1997)

** David Christian, 'Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History', *Journal of World History*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1-26.

*** Peter Turchin, 'A Theory for Formation of Large Empires', *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2000), pp. 191-217.

Another interesting piece of research by Niel Petersen and his team, 'Pluvials, Droughts, the Mongol Empire, and Modern Mongolia' has linked the rise and fall of the Mongol Empire specifically to climate change whereby wetter and warmer conditions in the early thirteenth century stimulated the growth of grasslands and permitted the growth in the number of horses that made up their formidable cavalry, and that a return to drought conditions precipitated the Empire's decline.*

It is a characteristic of historians and social scientists to label things. It makes it easier to identify common characteristics and to clarify the exact subjects of discussion. Once we start labelling, we establish hierarchies. These usually move 'progressively' to ever higher levels of sophistication. Let us take a few examples. In defining human settlement, we move from pastoral (ranging from 'hunter gatherers' to nomads) to agricultural (tending crops and settled herds) to urban. Looking at political economy, Karl Marx took us from feudalism to bourgeois capitalism and, through the proletarian revolution, to communism.**

3.e Concept Definition

Capitalism

An economic system in which the means of production are privately owned (instead of by the state) and used to generate and maximize profit.

Development economists measure the relative size of sectors to take us from agriculture, through industry to trade and services as a route to increase prosperity. Political scientists measure systems of governance of a scale from autocracy (hard and moderate) through hybrid regimes to democracy (deficient and working). For Europeans, this labelling is all very convenient since they see themselves (despite or because of the absence of a proletarian revolution) at the top of all of these scales – urban, capitalist, service-based, democratic and rich – and they see these as interrelated explanations. Feeling blessed indeed by history, Europeans back-project their own (narrowly defined) past as the single most important perspective. The rest matters only to the extent that it follows. Ferdinand von Richthofen's coining of the term 'the silk road' is a case in point. The trade was never primarily in silk, it was never primarily between the ends of the continent (a great deal was between steppe and sedentary civilizations in the middle) and it predated China's (and Rome's) entry into the exchange. But linking the narrative to 'Rome', and to the stories of high-class Roman ladies' fashion for wearing virtually transparent Chinese silks, the term focused the narrative on Europe.

* Niel Petersen et al., 'Pluvials, Droughts, the Mongol Empire, and Modern Mongolia', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 111, No. 12 (2014), pp. 4375-379.

** This concept will be further elaborated in chapter 7.

The history of the Silk Roads blows all these hierarchies apart. It tells of sophisticated complex interlocking short- and long-range networks of trade in a world dominated by huge, feudal, autocratic empires; of trading networks conducted largely by nomadic, pastoral peoples; of systems of money and credit that long predate their introduction in Europe; and of intercultural exchanges of knowledge, technologies, ideas and religions that shaped the entire known world. It is true that it is framed by periods of relative peace and stability that allow exchanges to flourish, sometimes sustained by the existence of large empires. However, the real story of the Silk Roads is one populated by merchants, craftsmen, adventurers, sailors, monks, refugees and slaves. It is being vigorously researched by good old-fashioned archaeology, the rereading of documents previously regarded as being of marginal importance and by the application of state-of-the-art technology.

One historical debate has been well and truly resolved – the importance of long-distance Eurasian overland trade and the role played therein by silk. Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: a New History* even suggested that the silk road was 'possibly not worth studying – if the tonnage carried, traffic or numbers of travelers at any time were the sole measures of a given route's significance. True, in terms of volume and size, the trade of the silk road was not as important as thought'.*

The Overland Trade Roads

A direct line drawn between Xian, the ancient capital of China, and Antioch, on the shores of the Mediterranean is 6,461 km. The shortest feasible overland route would be 7,250 km. There was no single road winding from Asia to Europe. Rather there was a diversity of paths, tracks and roads that changed over time and also fluctuated seasonally as river crossings and mountain passes became impassable. Regional conflicts, changing markets and shifts in political power meant that the Silk Roads were never static. Some of the routes emerged from South-East Asia and the Indian subcontinent and joined the routes joining East and West. Still others took goods and travelers to and from sea-ports.

The Polish researcher T. Matthew Ciolek, in his 'Old World Trading Routes' website, has collected data for all the known references to cities, market places, caravanserais, way-stations and monasteries (and the distances between them) and projected them all onto maps.** One of the projections for the period 1200-1400 CE, based on 121 data-points is shown below.

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* Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 235.

** T. Matthew Ciolek, 'Old World Trading Routes'. Available at: http://www.ciolek.com/owtrad.html Last accessed 15 April 2022.

However, this approach fails to give any indication of the relative importance of different routes. It is not enough to data-point them by the distance between them. The proper mapping of the routes has to take account of the presence of natural barriers, by the availability of water and grazing fields and by the risk of robbery and attack. By adding a qualitative dimension to the quantitative data, Tim Williams, working for the International Council on Monuments and Sites to prepare a report for the UNESCO listing of Silk Roads sites, produced a network of 75,000 km of routes (subdivided into major and important) within the area of his investigation.[*] Because of the Report's intention to help select World Heritage Sites, the scope of the routes covers the entire period 200 BCE-1500 CE.

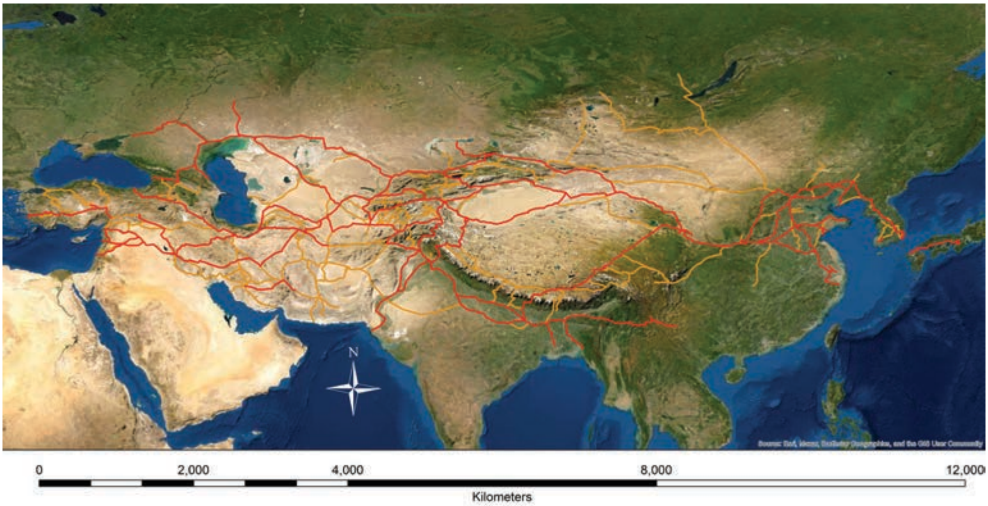

Image 3.2 Silk Roads Map: The vast geographical extent of the terrestrial Silk Roads, showing major routes (in red) and other significant routes (orange)

Both of the surveys stop at the shores of the Mediterranean, where there is a long and reliable record of trade. One consequence, however, is that they miss one important route, northwards, linking the overland routes to the Black Sea with the river routes to northern Russia and thence to Scandinavia. The Vikings inhabited an area coinciding with southern Sweden. Between 800 and 1000 CE they expanded into Western Europe. However, around the same date they were also sailing down the Dnieper river to Constantinople, trading furs, amber and slaves in exchange for silver. For historians two questions emerge. First, when did the river trade begin? Second, how important was it for accumulating wealth compared with the plunder and Danegeld (a tribute to avoid being attacked) from their forages into Western

[*] Tim Williams, *The Silk Roads. An Icomos Thematic Study*, Working Paper ICOMOS (Charenton-le-Pont, France, 2014).

Europe? One way of answering the question is to see whether the coins discovered in Viking sites are of western or eastern origin. The problem here is that the Vikings carried most of their wealth with them in the form of intricate silver neck-rings (or smaller versions worn on their arms or wrists) that reflected both wealth and status.

Image 3.3 A collection of Permian Rings

These 'Permian' rings, so called because of the quantity found in Perm (deep inside Russian territory), would have been made by melting down silver coins. The rings seem to be made in standard weights (approximately 200 grams for the neck rings, 100 grams for the arms and 50 grams for the wrist rings), suggesting that they were used as a form of currency. The composition of eastern silver differs from the composition of silver coming from western mines. All of the rings, as well as most of the silver ingots and jewelry that have been found, have silver of eastern origin. With expansion of the Muslim Caliphates in the eighth century CE, the coinage changed and so did the source of the silver. In 2018, Jane Kershaw started a major research project using advanced laser ablation techniques to determine the lead content in the silver (without damaging the objects) that will allow the silver to be matched to the date of the dirhams from which they were made, and therefore we expect to be able to date more accurately the timing of Viking engagement in the Silk Roads.*

* Jane Kershaw, Blogpost 'New Project, 'Silver and the Origins of the Viking Age' https://vikingmetalwork.blogspot.com/2019/ and telephone conversation with the author.

Exchanges of the Silk Roads

It is important to stress up front that it was not traders that moved along the Silk Roads, but goods. All delivered to market places, resold and moved on – the price rising according to the taxes levied upon them and by the scarcity value as they moved further away from their origins. It is true that there were exceptions. Individual diplomats and missionaries and the occasional adventurer, such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta that made the entire journey from west to east and back. At other times large groups migrated along stretches of the Silk Roads, driven by war or famine and often appearing in new locations as raiders or 'barbarians'. Smaller numbers, such as the Sogdians, moved along the trading routes to settle in market towns, where they would form enclaves of similar nationality, culture or religion until, over time, they formed part of the towns' multicultural fabric. However, the durability of this seemingly harmonious existence should not be exaggerated either. When rebel forces attacked the Chinese port city of Guangzhou in 874 CE it is estimated that they killed 120,000 foreign residents of the city. A century later the city was back in business, characterized by one historian as 'the most globalized place on Earth'.*

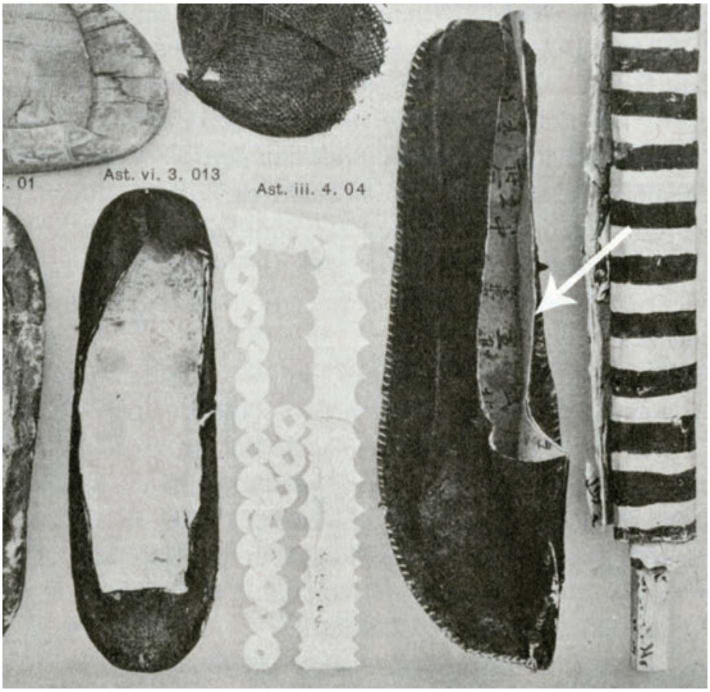

Image 3.4 Sogdian shoes

* Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World and Globalization Began* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), pp. 199-226.

The picture of trade is one of traders moving relatively short distances between market cities, and then returning with a different cargo to their home base. Many products were traded in this way. It was the custom of the 500 residents of the oasis town of Turfan (near present-day Urumqi, Xinjiang province) to bury their dead with garments (shoes, belts, hats and clothing) made from recycled paper. The dry climate ensured that they were preserved. Analysis of the clothing showed that many had been made of recycled documents – contracts or tax records. One particular set of documents (pieced together from ten paper shoes) records the names of the merchants and the weekly sales. The most common sales were for gold, silver, silk thread, 'aromatics' (which could include spices, fragrances and medicine) and ammonium chloride (used for dyeing, leather and metal working). Silk cloth is not mentioned as a commodity. It does, however, appear in other reconstructed records – as payment or collateral for commercial transactions. The answer to the riddle is that bolts of cloth were used as money. They were not transported by merchants but by army convoys. One use was to pay the troops. Since Turfan was a border town, bolts of silk were readily available in the vicinity. The other use was in cross-border trade. And the one commodity that the army wanted was horses. The horses of the steppes, the 'heavenly horses' so coveted by Emperor Wu and rumored to 'sweat blood' when ridden hard (probably caused by skin sores produced by small parasites), were far superior to those domestically available in China (where the lack of selenium in the grass had disastrous effects on the horses' health and strength). During the early Tang Empire (ca. 750 CE) the army alone needed 80,000 horses and it imported about 7,500 a year at an average price for each of 38-40 bolts of silk. This amounts to almost 300,000 bolts of silk. Some of it the horse merchants and the Sogdian traders used as a store of money and collateral for their dealings with the Chinese, and some of it entered the long-distance trade, especially before the diffusion of silk making from the sixth century CE onwards.

As goods moved across vast distances, so did the technologies that made their productions possible. We have already seen that silk production had moved westward as early as 500 CE. The secret of paper production passed to the Abbasid Caliphate with the capture of Chinese paper-makers in the battle of Talas in 751 CE and eventually spread to Europe some 400 years later. By contrast, the knowledge of gunpowder, possibly invented in China in the eleventh century CE, took a relatively short 200 years to reach Europe. The spread of knowledge was not one-way. The techniques of producing translucent glass passed from Europe to China around the sixth century CE. It would be wrong to focus on the transfers of 'important' knowledge and techniques. Information on foods and medicine passed across cultures as well as artistic designs and motifs. As people moved, so did their language, cultures, knowledge but also germs and pathogens moved with them.

One important part of that culture was the pattern of the spread of religious beliefs. It is not known when Buddhism spread to China.* The religion had been founded in India in the sixth century BCE but may have entrenched itself sufficiently to have formed part of the sweeping ban on all religions imposed by Emperor Qin Shi Huang (221-206 BCE). However, it certainly survived independently and many of its beliefs were incorporated in Taoism and animist religions. By 399 CE there were so many Buddhist texts in the country, in so many versions and so many bad translations, that the Buddhist monk Faxian set off to India to collect original Buddhist sutra. He also produced an account of his hard overland journey to northern India and Sri Lanka. Interestingly, he made the return journey, via Java, by ship. Some three hundred years later the monk Yijing made a similar voyage three times, on each occasion returning by boat. Interestingly, over half of the fellow monks that he met on his journeys had travelled this way. Buddhist shrines can be found all along the caravan routes of the 'silk road', including the seventy-seven rock caves at Bezeklik near Turfan and the almost 500 caves at Magao near Dunhuang. The latter is the complex where Aurel Stein and the French explorer Paul Pelliot recovered (stole) thousands of documents from a walled-up cave, which attest to the variety of religious beliefs in the region over the thousand years after 400CE.

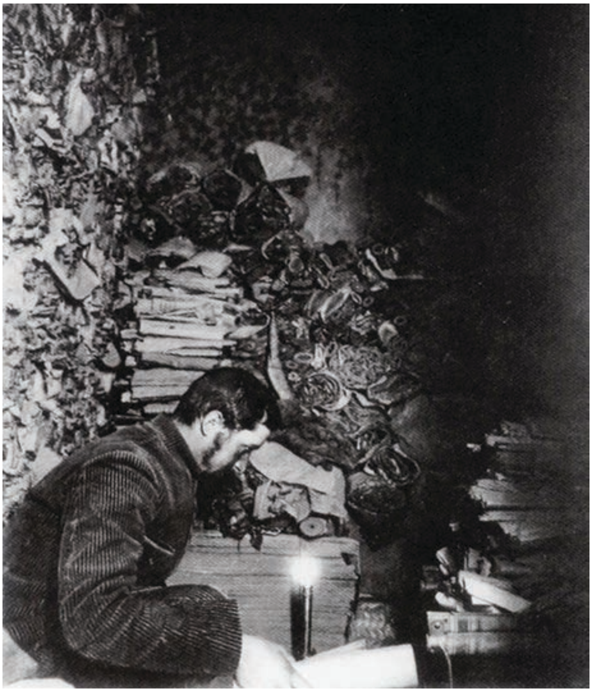

Image 3.5 Paul Pelliot examining manuscripts in Cave 17 at Mogao Caves, Dunhuang (1908)

* Buddhism will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

Islam made its way across the Eurasian land-mass in the wake of the conquests of the Islamic armies. Their speed had been helped by allowing cities that surrendered to escape unscathed and, if they wished, to keep their religious beliefs. They would, however, be taxed as non-Muslims, a fact that provided a pecuniary incentive for conversion which helped the faith to blanket the territory up to and including the western provinces of China. In addition, Muslim communities established themselves in market towns along trade routes and in port cities, such as in Guangzhou where, as we have seen, they were the target of a massacre in 874CE.

One other religion prevalent in Central Asia in this period was Zoroastrianism, based on the teachings of Zoroastra in modern-day Iran some three thousand years ago. It was the main religion of the Sogdians. Most of the merchants in Turfan were Sogdians, and they too settled in major trading cities, where they kept hold of their beliefs. One further group, scattered along the Silk Road towns were Nestorian Christians. These formed an off-shoot from the Orthodox Christian church. The teachings of Nestorius held that Jesus had two natures – one divine and one human – and the Church declared his teachings heretical in 450CE. As a result of the subsequent persecutions, his followers fled East and spread along the trading routes. Interestingly, knowledge of their existence fed the myth of Prester John, prevalent in Europe in the twelfth century CE, that suggested that there was a leader of the (Nestorian) Christian Empire who would join the fight against Islam – if only he could be found.

The Size of the Trades

One question that needs answering is: how much would a caravan carry? First, we have to appreciate that not all of the camels would be carrying the final cargo. Some camels were needed for the food and equipment for the men. Others carried the fodder for the camels themselves. They might be able to travel long distances without water, but not without food. In addition, half or a whole of a camel load would be for private trade during the journey by the pullers, accounting for another 2.75-5.50 per cent of the total. Let us assume that 50 per cent of the camel train is actually carrying trade goods (I have seen estimates as low as 30 per cent). A fully loaded adult camel can carry a weight of 300 kg, but these are long journeys and the camel has to be loaded and unloaded twice a day – even with two people, 300 kg is a big ask. It seems fair to assume that the average adult would be carrying half of that (and camels under seven years of age would be 'broken in' with even lighter loads). Using generous assumptions, we can assume that a single camel train of 200-300 camels would be carrying 15-22.5 tons of cargo. That cargo has to pay for the journey, and pay the various taxes and charges levied en route (someone paid for all those beautiful buildings that adorned the legendary Silk Road cities). The cargoes, therefore, would be high-value, low-weight goods that were plentiful (and cheap) at the point of origin and scarce (and expensive) at the point of arrival, and preferably not too fragile.

It is easy to see why romance swirls around the legends of the Silk Roads, exotic cargoes and colorful destinations. It is also easy to see why people have long been drawn to rediscovering its past. Titanic battles with vast armies have been fought along its route. Whole civilizations have risen and fallen over the ages. Larger-than-life leaders and kings have strutted across the pages of its history and unknown treasures still await discovery. This is all because this part of history plays out on land. You cannot build at sea and there are fewer borders to define it. Yet we ignore the sea to our peril.

We know that when the Romans opened the trade between the Red Sea and India, they were engaging in already established routes. The sailors, however, were probably Greek or Arab. By then the seafarers had started to manage the seasonal monsoon winds and traded further southwards along the Indian coast. At that time, Indian and Asian traders in the East were still hugging the coastal rotes around the Bay of Bengal. Chinese ships were confined mainly in trade along China's own coastline and with what are now Korea and Japan.

By the year 800 CE, both Arab and Indian sailors were using the Monsoons and were actively trading in Sri Lanka and the southernmost ports of India. China, however, was still content to rely on Indian and Asian shipping for the conduct of its global overseas trade. The absence of Chinese wrecks in the Java Sea confirms the

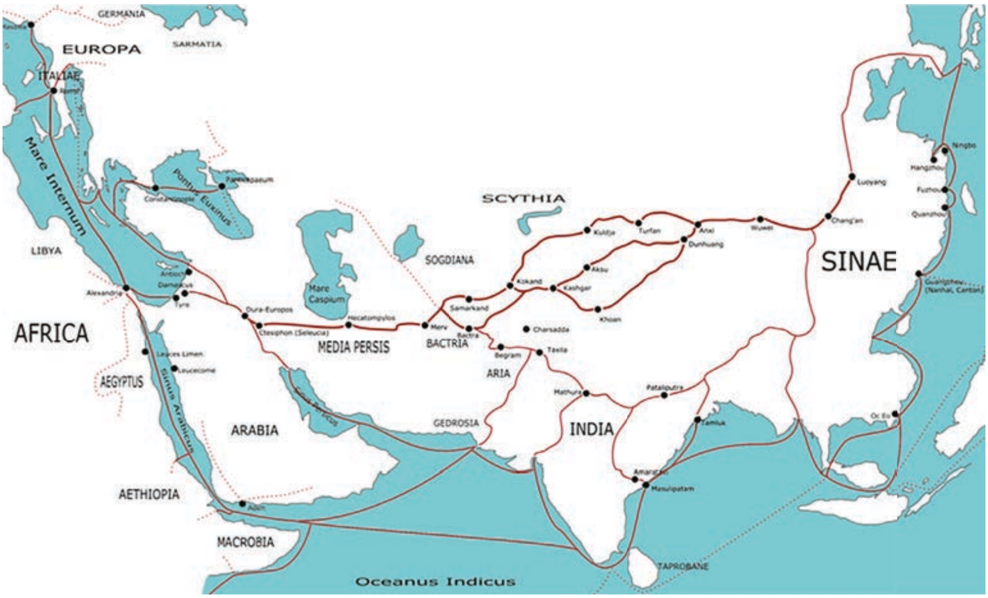

Image 3.6 Map of Silk Road Sea Routes

suspicion that Chinese ships did not venture actively into South East Asian trade until after 1100 CE. Moreover, until the diplomatic/trading missions of Admiral Zheng He, it is unlikely that Chinese ships engaged much in the Indian Ocean trade. The 'pirates' plaguing the straits of Malacca may simply have been guarding a shipping monopoly in the waters of the Bay of Bengal.

Just as we have suggested that it is unlikely that many camel trains made the entire journey from Europe to China themselves, so it is equally improbable that ships did so either. Goods were traded in rich entrepot ports. These would have been clustered around the southern tip of India, in Sumatra (that controlled the access to the Straits of Malacca) and at the great Persian, Arab and Chinese end destinations. Very occasionally we can obtain an insight into the nature of this trade. In 2003 local fishermen, 100 km from the Javan port of Cirebon, retrieved shards of pottery in their nets. Marine archaeologists discovered the wreck of an 'Arab style' dhow that had sunk around 970 CE. It was 30 meters long, ten meters wide, and capable of carrying 300 tons of cargo (equivalent to twenty trains of 200-camels). Divers recovered 200 tons of Chinese earthenware and 40 tons of metal ingots. Possibly more remarkable still was the Intan wreck, the key source of this chapter, which had sunk a little earlier, if the dates of the coins are any indication. The cargo included bottles from Southern Thailand, large shards from blue-green iridescent glazed jars from West Asia and a hundred silver ingots and a wide range of Buddhist and Hindu cultural items.

Not only have we, relatively speaking, neglected the maritime Silk Roads, which have been far more important in their tonnage of trade compared to the overland routes, but also the evidence from the maritime archaeological investigations reveals the order and importance of the ports of call for the ships. The overland camel trains which trigger our imagination, carrying cargoes of treasure, have likely overshadowed their actual importance. Further maritime archaeology holds promise of more clarity on this issue.

Image 3.7 Ceramics from the Intan Wreck

The End of the Silk Roads

In 1405 the collapse of Tamerlane's Samarkand-based empire led to anarchy in the region, forcing traders to make long and dangerous detours and damaging long-distance trade through the region. Then, when in 1453 the Ottoman Empire captured the last European stronghold in the eastern Mediterranean, Constantinople, they cut off the overland routes to Europe. In China, after the last of Admiral He's voyages, the Emperor outlawed Chinese engagement in overseas trade, possibly because of the restoration of Confucians in the administration. Confucianism, with its emphasis on land and family and on social stability and hierarchy, had little time for the disruption caused by private capital and enterprise. In neither case did the trade disappear. Overland, short-distance pedlar trade in all probability continued more or less as usual. In overseas trade, inferior Thai earthenware replaced Chinese ceramics and Chinese merchants began themselves to operate from foreign ports. It was probably ever so, the ebb and flow of human exchange, whenever peace permitted it.

Guiding Questions

1. Where does the name Silk Roads derive from?
2. Which goods were traded along the Silk Roads?
3. What is the significance of the maritime Silk Road?
4. How have Silk Roads been investigated?
5. What is the debate about the Silk Roads?

Guide to Further Reading

- Abulafia, David, *The Boundless Sea. A Human History of the Oceans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 85-188, 236-296. A challenging, question-driven guide to trade and exchanges in the world's oceans.
- Bergreen, Laurence, *Marco Polo. From Venice to Xanadu* (London: Vintage, 2008). Following the adventures of fourteenth century explorer Marco Polo, accompanied by a knowledgeable guide from the twenty-first century.
- Frankopan, Peter, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). A mixture of the great, the good and the bad, carving out territories for themselves whilst below the convulsions vast cultural (and material) exchanges occur.
- Hopkirk, Peter, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). An account of the explorers who found/robbed, bought/stole and preserved/destroyed the cultural relics of the Silk Roads.
- Jarman, Cat, *River Kings. A New History of the Vikings from Scandinavia to the Silk Roads* (London: William Collins, 2021). Discover how advanced scientific techniques allow us to trace a rare piece of carellian found in a Viking grave in England back to its origins in Gujarat in India.
- Lattimore, Owen, *The Desert Road to Turkestan* (New York: Kodansha, 1995), (original 1929). In 1925 Owen Lattimore travelled 1,500 kilometres with a camel train through Mongolia, and kept a detailed account of his journey.
- Levathes, Louise, *When China ruled the Seas. The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). A rich account of the seven voyages of Admiral Zheng He through lands of the maritime Silk Roads.
- Hansen, Valerie, *The Silk Road. A New History with Documents*, Oxford, 2017. A richly illustrated history of the overland silk road with extracts of over fifty original documents.
- Whitfield, Susan, *Life along the Silk Road* (Oakland Calif.: University of California Press, 2015). A view of the Silk Road through the experiences of twelve travelers from different cultures and different epochs.
- Wood, Frances, *The Silk Road. Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002). It is unfashionable to approach history through the lens of western explorers, but indulge yourself in this lavishly illustrated history.

CHAPTER 4.

Political Order: From Coercion to Constitution

BRIAN SHAEV

Introduction

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there," English novelist L.P. Hartley wrote in the mid-twentieth century. Hartley presents a concept of history as distance and alienation, like visiting a foreign land. Exploring European cities, some more than a thousand years old, is a journey through time, through centuries and therefore through different lands, perhaps within the space of a few city blocks, or simply by climbing the steps of a museum. Nowhere is this truer than in Italy, where fantastic remnants of ancient Rome share the same ground with startling Renaissance art and architecture. In between are all the trappings of our modern times that, in some cases, have had to adapt to their ancient surroundings. Plans to expand the metro system in Rome, for instance, have long been stunted by the incredible archeological treasures still lying underground.

In Hartley's concept, Romans, or Florentines, or Venetians today, who admire the riches surrounding them on coffee breaks, on family outings, or on a Vespa wisping through town, are not visiting *their* past. Rather, they are visiting *the* past. This fundamental and unshakeable difference between past and present, even when their objects share the same physical ground, was one of the key breakthroughs in the art of understanding and writing history. When a hunt for ancient Roman texts and art turned into a frenzy in thirteenth century Italy, medieval writers looked at their discoveries less for what they communicated about the past than for what they could perhaps say about their present. They peered at old texts like lost brothers, studied ancient law books and Aristotle's *Politics* to analyze their contemporary conditions, and called on leaders to rebuild the glory of Rome. Their past was not gone – it was all around them. They could even touch it.

Then one of the greatest achievements of Renaissance Italy arrived: humanism. An artistic, literary, and intellectual movement, humanism was born when the Italian poet Petrarch climbed a mountain in 1336 and wrote a manuscript celebrating the immense beauty of human interaction with its natural environment.

Image 4.1 Petrach

Against the austere climate of his age, with its focus on Man's fall in Christian theology, Petrarch proffered an optimistic image of humanity, a celebration of humanity which came to be known as humanism.

4.a Concept Definition

Humanism

Intellectual movement focused on the human in its natural environment.

Over the next centuries, humanism developed into a cultural renaissance inspiring the literature, paintings, scientific achievements, and statues of Donatello, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Niccolò Machiavelli, and many more. It then passed to northern Europe in the sixteenth century, finding fullest expression in the biting sarcasm of Erasmus of Rotterdam and the stunning beauty of the paintings of the seventeenth century Dutch United Provinces. By then it had become the core curriculum of Europe's great universities – the humanities, which has passed all the way down to our university curriculum today.

Petrarch was more than a great poet. He reintroduced Europe to the idea that the present is not the same as the past, that times change, and people change. Ancient historians in Greece and Rome had developed a similar concept of history but that had been lost to the region following the fall of Rome in the fifth century. Most importantly, Petrarch employed an essential tool of the historical craft: periodization. Casting a disapproving eye back to the period that came before him, he designated the period between the fall of Rome and his present as the 'Dark Ages' or 'middle age'. There was no continuity between contemporary Italy and ancient Rome in his sense of historical time. Rome had ended long ago. The duty of the present was not to restore antiquity but to learn from it, to 'shine the light' on past and present in order to create a new future that valued human achievements and that encouraged the pursuit of greatness in all walks of life, as the Romans had done. He announced the dawn of a new era and, in doing so, he essentially created one.

Petrarch's division of time into three periods not only helped kick off the Italian Renaissance: it created a structure to European history that historians still largely accept – and teach – today (historians now divide the period into the Low Middle Ages, ca. 400s-1000, and the High Middle Ages, ca. 1000-1250, when there was renewed civilizational expansion). It also gave rise to a new confidence – even conceit – among humanists of the next generations as to how one should read history, i.e., what the proper *methodology* for understanding the past should be. As Italian humanists interacted with writers from other intellectual traditions, in particular scholasticists inspired by Thomas Aquinas' concept of natural law, they could at times barely conceal their contempt. Texts had to be analyzed within the contexts in which they were produced, they insisted. Writers who snatched ancient texts out of their contexts deserved nothing more than ridicule. In the end, humanists were convinced, scholastistics were just making things up.

A single intellectual tradition rarely achieves total victory, however. For centuries humanism and scholasticism competed and interacted in European thought as 'two languages of politics,' to use historian J.G.A. Pocock's phrasing. From the 1200s to 1500s, the two traditions contributed to an increasingly sophisticated concept that is central to our own understanding today of politics and international relations: the state. According to a classic interpretation, this happened in Renaissance Italy, though some scholars think it originated in Europe's largest medieval kingdoms (France and Spain) before migrating to Italy. Regardless, the concept underwent further elaboration after it migrated to Italy, a bit ironically as Italy was among the areas of early modern Europe where centralized rule was weakest. After the pope's power collapsed in the 1100s in northern areas of Italy, hundreds of republican city-states proliferated, many with written constitutions and elected governments like those in Florence, Milan, and Venice. Over time these tended to devolve into oligarchies ruled by wealthy families, of whom the Medici family of Florence was most famous.

Image 4.2 Cosimo de Medici, statue Piazza de Signioria, Florence

When French armies invaded in the Italian Wars of the late fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, northern Italy descended into a vicious cycle of war, instability, and decline. The Medici – as elsewhere – dissolved the Florentine Republic in the sixteenth century, and instituted an inherited system of family rule.

Republicans – followers of an ideology that celebrated the 'freedom' of the Italian republics and promoted concepts of popular sovereignty – were aghast at these developments. Out of their increasingly sophisticated analyses of their contemporary woes emerged a new form of political science informed by comparative history. Renaissance scholars assembled what they could about past and present communities. They celebrated the Roman Republic as *an example* rather than as *their inheritance*. A 'cult of Brutus,' the figure who murdered Roman Emperor Julius Caesar, swept popular culture in Northern Italy. Renaissance humanists at first emphasized the virtues, e.g. of Brutus – or lack of virtues, e.g. of Julius Caesar – of rulers to explain the success or failure of political communities. Deeply influenced by medieval Christian concepts even as they were moving away from some of them, they measured the virtues of rulers by whether or not they followed the will of God. Over time, their inquisitive gaze moved beyond a focus on the ruling figure itself to the web of social relations: the system and organization that allowed a ruler to rule.

This decisive shift – from a *personal* to *impersonal* understanding of the art of governing as taking place through institutions – implied a secular shift in how to analyze politics.

4.b Concept Definition
Politics
*The ability to decide who gets what, where, when and how.**

It also allowed for the emergence of a mature concept of 'a state' as separate from both ruler and ruled, a ruling body that might outlive its present occupants, though this idea remained tentative. An early move came from Italian lawyers in the 1200s, who developed the idea that a *civitas*, the Latin word for city or community, and *corporation*, by which they meant a university, a municipality, or another recognized institution, were more than a sum of their members. Rather they were single entities with their own legal personality that could be 'represented' by individuals who had the legitimacy to speak in their names. From the 1300s, the concept was employed for governing and territorial units, for instance in a statue titled 'Venice,' represented as a woman sitting on a throne at the Palazzo Ducale.

Image 4.3 Ancient Façade Sculpture of a Princess with Sword and Lions at the top Decoration of Doge's Palace in Venice

Image 4.4 Nicolo Machiavelli

* Based on the famous definition of: Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How* (New York: Smith 1950).

Renaissance ideas of politics culminated in Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) and *The Discourses on Livy* (1516). Placing Machiavelli in his historical context has led historians to reframe *The Prince* in part as a job application. Cast out of public employment when Lorenzo de Medici attacked the Florentine Republic, he looked to ingratiate himself to the new ruler with his book. Though he was unsuccessful – he was even tortured under suspicion of conspiracy – his writings had a profound impact on the development of political thought and concepts of the state in early modern Europe. Machiavelli – in a shocking manner – placed power, brute force, at the center of his politics. Building on the republican humanist tradition, which he shared, he embarked on a comparative history of ancient Roman rulers and exhorted the prince to model himself on an exemplary historical figure. Rather than valorizing good intentions and good will in a ruler as had been the prevailing norm, his understanding of politics led him to conclude that what matters is a ruler's 'appearance'. He argued that a ruler pursuing personal virtue at the expense of the community is engaging in vanity rather than virtue. His point was not that one should behave badly, but that one should recognize when it is necessary to behave badly. The principal task of a ruler was not to walk in the path of God, Machiavelli insisted, but to protect the security of himself and those over whom he rules.

Under Machiavelli's pen, the ruler was, therefore, divested of Christian obligation. When necessary, he should act as a 'beast' and model himself on the strength of the lion and the cunning of the fox. 'Maintaining his state' became the ruler's main task, to which all else was subordinate. 'Maintaining his state' was a cliché found widely in late Renaissance Italian texts, but Machiavelli took the language a step further, detaching the concept from its possessive form, writing about 'a state' and 'the state' in *The Prince*.[*] Machiavelli's secular concept of the state, the self-preservation of which was the supreme virtue, was to become an enormously powerful concept shaping the politics and history of Europe.[**] The main argument of this chapter is that the emergence of political order was a long and conflictual process. Along the way, several ordering principles were developed and tried, such as religious, dynastic and legal.

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[*] Machiavelli employs the terms 'uno stato' and 'lo stato' multiple times in *The Prince*. http://www.letteraturaitaliana.net/pdf/Volume_4/t324.pdf

[**] Anthony Grafton, 'The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950-2000 and Beyond', *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 67, No. 1 (2006), pp. 1-32; Miguel Vatter, 'Republics are a species of state: Machiavelli and the Genealogy of the Modern State', *Social Research* Vol. 81, No. 1 (2014), pp. 217-242.

Historiography of European Political Thought

This early 'genealogy of the state' was a central part of the life's work of Quentin Skinner, a leading thinker in the twentieth-century 'Cambridge School' of history.* Locating the conceptual roots of 'the state' in the republican humanist traditions of the Italian Renaissance is one of Skinner's defining legacies. This was a novel approach in the mid-twentieth century, as intellectual history and the history of ideas had previously focused on art and metaphysics, not on politics. The Cambridge School's major contribution was to insist that political philosophy could only be understood within the historical context in which it was written.

Placing historical figures widely dispersed in time and space into conversation with each other, as philosophers do, in a sort of transhistorical pantheon of great thinkers, was *ahistorical* and led to false scholarly claims, among the most important of which were *anachronisms*.

4.1 The Study of History

Anachronism

An error of chronological logic or misplacement of chronology.

Rather than placing Machiavelli in extended dialogue with ancient and classical writers like Aristotle and St. Augustine, it would be far more revealing to study how Machiavelli interacted with the people who lived around him – his contemporaries. Of course, as elite thought was communicated primarily through texts in early modern Europe – and Renaissance authors had recovered many Roman texts – Machiavelli did interact with and learn from ancient and classical texts, but only within the modes of thought and in the contexts of interpretation and understanding of sixteenth-century Italy.

Historicist approaches to political philosophy – the history of political thought – have ruffled more than a few feathers. As detailed in the introductory chapter, historicism tries to understand history in its unique context, time and place. The potential of historicism to reveal new insights into long-studied figures comes out, for instance, in Peter Laslett's study of John Locke's *Two Treatises*. John Locke's classic text expounded our modern concept of liberalism as a system of constrained representation accompanied by constitutional checks on monarchical power.

* Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

4.c Concept Definition

Liberalism

Political philosophy focused on the individual, bestowed with individual rights, liberties and equality before the law.

Since Locke's text was published in 1689, it was thought to have been written to celebrate and justify the English Glorious Revolution of the previous year, in which the 'absolutist' government of James II ceded power to William III, who bound himself to constitutional monarchy in exchange for the crown of England in alliance with the 'Whigs' or liberals in Parliament. This *myth* was decisively challenged by Laslett, who subjected the *Two Treatises* to close textual reading and employed the historical method to uncover how Locke reflected on his own work in letters and other writings. In other words, Laslett turned to study Locke as an actual historical figure, rather than simply as a great thinker. Historicism allowed him to argue, to general astonishment, that Locke had composed the *Two Treaties* between 1679 and 1683, well before the 1688 Glorious Revolution. 'Two Treatises in fact turns out,' Laslett concludes, 'to be not the rationalization of a revolution in need of defense, but a demand for a revolution yet to be brought about.'*

There is a tension on display here between the historicist insistence that concepts can only be understood in their contexts and historians' mission to narrate the origins of our present moment, e.g. the origins of European democracy. As is clear by now, people in the past frequently used history to fight their political struggles. George Orwell was perceptive in this regard, writing in his novel *1984* that 'Who controls the present controls the past. Who controls the past controls the future.' Orwell was imagining a future dystopia, but his basic point linking who is in power to how history is told is one which historians have long had to grapple.**

There was a romanticist tradition in history in the nineteenth century especially that presented heroic national histories in the style of early nationalism. By the early twentieth century, these had often been replaced with narratives that focused on the emergence of liberal democracy. Historians traced such developments back to the Glorious Revolution and the Enlightenment period that followed. Concepts of history were changing – liberalism was replacing nationalism as a hegemonic discourse of what constituted progress. It was in this context that historian Herbert Butterfield wrote *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), in which he denounced as victors' history the tendency for early-modern histories to culminate in the rise of liberalism in the English and Glorious Revolutions. The term 'Whig history' then

* Peter Laslett, 'The English Constitution and Locke's "Two Treatises of Government', *The Cambridge Historical Journal* Vol. 12, No. 1 (1956), pp. 40-55.

** George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).

entered usage as a means of denouncing ideologically-tainted teleology and the abuse of history as propaganda in service of a state or ruling elite.

4.2 The Study of History

Teleology

Reasoning based on the perceived outcome. Evidence is interpreted in such a way that it confirms the supposed outcome of events.

Laslett struck an early blow on Whig history in his article about Locke, a hero of the Whig faction. It follows that the constitutional monarchies and propertied-based right to representation advocated by Locke in the *Two Treatises* were less important in a longer historical view.

One powerful version of 'Whig history' is the continued prevalence in public discourses that the Protestant Reformation was the origin of democracy and freedom (mediated later through Locke and constitutional liberalism). Recent work in conceptual history shows how these historical myths continue to structure our politics in the twenty-first century. Annelien de Dijn traces how our concept of freedom as the government leaving us alone is surprisingly new.* She argues that Italian humanists *understood freedom to mean popular sovereignty*, the ability of individuals *to participate* in government and politics. This concept of freedom prevailed for centuries until conservative opponents of the American and French Revolutions in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries redefined the concept. Only by recovering this conceptual history – and the 'antidemocratic' intentions of the authors who reframed freedom to mean limited government – can we ourselves come to recognize the power structures lurking behind the language of politics we inherit.

Political Ordering in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

Universal vs Territorial Order: The Birth of Europe in the Middle Ages

In 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne 'King of the Romans,' making Charlemagne the western successor to the mighty Roman Emperors after the papacy had lost faith in eastern Byzantine Emperors based in Constantinople. The papacy traced its authority back to Jesus Christ, who it claimed had appointed St. Peter leader of the Christian church. Peter, in turn, passed this authority to the Bishop of Rome, so beginning the lineage of Christian popes. The pope was spiritual leader of the church, and hence of Christendom (the 'Holy See'), but he became a territorial ruler as well in Rome and in papal territories spread throughout Italy after the

* Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020)

Roman Empire collapsed in the 400s CE. Crowning Charlemagne Emperor was a daring move by the medieval pope further into the realm of secular power. It laid the political basis for a refoundation of the Roman Empire while claiming for the papacy the authority to anoint emperors to their thrones.

Universal order over Christendom, the combining of spiritual and secular power in alliance with a revived empire, was the pope's striking ambition. Charlemagne's Carolingian Empire managed to extend Frankish rule over modern day France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Switzerland, northern Italy and Spain, and parts of Croatia and Czechia. His rule rested on a web of interpersonal relations with leading power-brokers (magnates) and oaths of fidelity between ruler and ruled that bound them together in contractual relationships of reciprocal rights and duties, a governing system known as feudalism.

4.d Concept Definition

Feudalism

Type of rule based on a hierarchy of patrons who are tied to clients, who in their turn can act as patrons to others. In this hierarchical system goods, labor and favors flow up and down this system, to substantiate claims to authority, legitimacy and rule. This was the dominant system of rule in Medieval Europe until the 'Age of Revolutions' and is still in existence in many other parts of the world.

After his death, Charlemagne's Empire broke in three in the Treaty of Verdun (843), with two of its pieces, Eastern and Western Frankia, developing into what are today France and Germany. The breakup of Charlemagne's empire into personal kingdoms is dramatic evidence that rulership was not linked to a territorial state. Western Christendom emerged weakened from this partition. After Otto of Saxony defeated a wave of Hungarian invasions, the pope crowned him Holy Roman Emperor in 962, an imperial throne that persisted for over 800 years, but the break with France became permanent.

By 1000, western Christendom had fragmented into innumerable political units. Besides the papacy, the most important polities in Europe in the High Middle Ages (1000-1250) were kingdoms and city-states.

4.e Concept Definition

Kingdom

Territorial unit ruled by a hereditary monarch, i.e. a king or queen.

4.f Concept Definition

City-state

Territorial unit based on a city and its immediate surroundings.

The Frankish and Gothic kingdoms that replaced Rome in the 400s-600s theorized that royal power was passed down by God but at the same time had to conform with the law of custom. These twin bases of authority provided the model for medieval kingship. Rarely did the power of medieval kings extend far beyond the area around the royal court itself. Carrying sword and religion, Frankish knights spread Christian rule to Bohemia, Hungary, Poland and Scandinavia. They constructed thousands of castles across Europe's landscape – and theoretically grounded their rule on the 'right to conquest'. Castles served economic as well as political and military functions because they were centers of communication that extracted rents and tolls and extended rule into the countryside. This is how *Europe* was made, historian Robert Bartlett argues, because the lands west of Byzantine attained an unprecedented level of cultural, social, religious, and political homogenization between 1000 and 1300.*

Faced with the universal pretensions of the Holy See, medieval rulers elaborated early concepts of territorial and local rule that we later would come to call sovereignty.

4.g Concept Definition

Sovereignty

Supreme or ultimate authority and freedom of action. There is no internal or external higher source of authority.

4.h Concept Definition

Republic

Form of government in which authority is held by the people through elective representation.

Most explosive was the question of whether papal anointment was needed for monarchs to rightfully hold office and, by extension, whether popes could 'de-crown' kings. During the Investiture Controversy (1075-1122) the pope excommunicated Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV and freed his subjects from their oaths of loyalty. Royal defenders responded that kings are granted 'two swords', the one secular and the other religious, and hence monarchical authority came directly from God, rather than from the papacy. Controversy erupted again in the fourteenth century, as Pope Boniface VIII insisted that only the church could tax or imprison French clergy and bishops. Not intimidated, French King Philip the Fair rallied opinion to his side by calling an *Estates General* of bishops, nobles, and leading Parisian burghers for the first time. Boniface responded with *Unam Sanctum*, the most extreme articulation of papal power in history, which insisted that monarchs are entirely subordinate

* Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

to Rome.* Boniface's overreach led to an ignominious end. Captured by French forces, he died in captivity, and Philip established a puppet papacy in Avignon, over which he kept a close eye, to compete with the one in Rome. Papal pretensions to universal, secular power, shattered. Once fully restored to Rome, the papacy focused on maintaining power in Italy.

These were ideal conditions for the development of smaller, more compact, but more efficient and innovative territorial units: medieval and early Renaissance *city-states*. Nothing could be more indicative of the failure of the universal ordering project of the papacy, or of the limited reach of the Holy Roman Empire (whose leaders repeatedly failed to conquer northern Italy) than the dynamism of Italian city-states in the 1000s-1200s. It is there, rather than in seventeenth-century England, where Quintin Skinner and Annelien de Dijn locate the origins of European traditions of liberty and freedom. Several city-states like Venice and Genoa built trading empires in the northern Mediterranean. Florence and Padua, among others, had citizen assemblies. They had written constitutions, which were rare outside of Italy, and gave birth to humanism and the Renaissance, enormous cultural and political achievements. In the 1200s-1500s, republican city-states fell to conquest, despotism and oligarchy.

4.i Concept Definition

Despotism

Repressive rule based on the exercise of dictatorial power, usually by one individual sometimes also by a group.

4.j Concept Definition

Oligarchy

Rule by a small group, often sharing a distinct identity of ethnicity, social-class, military standing or religion.

Italian humanists valorized republican liberties even more as they slipped away. Tract after tract condemned the wickedness of kings and called for the restoration of ancient republican freedoms. Even in defeat, republicans left a powerful legacy to be taken up, in new circumstances, by constitutionalists and revolutionaries in later centuries.

The Rise of Kingdoms in Medieval and Renaissance Europe

In the 1100s-1200s, monarchical power revived, first in England, and then in France and the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon (which united to form Spain in the 1400s). Their growth over the next centuries made kingdoms the main political

* Joseph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450* (London: Routledge, 2014).

unit exercising power in early modern Europe. At first little more than royal courts that could be called upon to raise armies when needed, kingdoms extended their political influence internally first by creating a legal order of courts as well as a fiscal order of taxation and tax collectors. Crucially, over time kingdoms were able to gain the loyalty of most of the people over whom they ruled. Professionalization ensued, resulting in lawyers and accountants staffing royal bureaucracies, and kingdoms developed into administrative monarchies. In the 1500s-1600s, monarchs gained legislative powers to create new laws whereas previously their executive powers had been to defend existing law and customs – but here they ran into challenges from constitutionalists (see the next section). By then, the large kingdoms had become permanent political systems, an essential attribute of statehood. Interestingly, the creation of permanent institutions of foreign policy expertise was one of the last areas to develop.*

4.k Concept Definition

State

A territorial unit with a monopoly of force within that territory. Usually with a bureaucracy entailing a legal, fiscal and social order.

Nowhere was legal order as strong a factor in centralizing political power in territorial units as it was in medieval and early modern Europe. Early court systems were ad hoc gatherings of power barons called to pass judgement over cases. The most important cases were heard and decided by the king. In England, locals were brought into the delivery of justice itself in jury systems, which contributed to their growing popularity. In the 1200s, law became increasingly professionalized, and cases could be judged on the basis of existing precedents. In France and Spain, more fragmented polities, there was suspicion that local power brokers would bend justice to their own purposes if left unchecked; jury systems were therefore not adopted. Still, their justice systems began seeking out criminal offences like heresy for punishment in defense of the 'common good' rather than just arbitrating between private disputes.** Building a legal order proved not only an excellent means of enhancing royal power in far-flung parts of a kingdom, but also of building popular support. Low nobility, townspeople, and commoners all availed themselves of royal courts to seek redress from their local superiors, a powerful motivation for people to support kingly power.

The second feature of early state centralization was the building of fiscal order. This first took the form of personal accountants to the king, who were private estate managers. They drew up balance sheets of royal revenues and expenses, and

* Joseph R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

** Roger I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008).

oversaw the development of tax systems. Like law, accountancy became refined and professionalized. Kings came to value legal and financial expertise as much as military expertise. Power in the 1200s gradually shifted from knights called to the king's defense to 'magistrates', i.e. government officials such as bureaucrats, accountants, surveyors and lawyers. Royal courts were staffed with university graduates, and monarchs made haste to establish universities specialized in law, finance, and religion. There professional standards were nurtured, and patterns of routinization allowed for predictability and standardization in the management of royal affairs. In this way, England, France and Spain developed into *administrative* monarchies, but the more centralized England was able to apply uniform laws and taxes throughout the realm, whereas the French appointed royal officials to apply local laws and taxes in line with provincial customs. Castile appointed governors but failed in its efforts to impose a uniform set of laws due to provincial resistance.

While courts made kings more popular, taxation arose resentment. External enemies and war proved a powerful basis to throw the balance towards a kingdom gaining the loyalty of the people over whom they ruled. In the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), generations of English invaded, plundered, and colonized France, wielding terrifying long-bows. Englanders organized large food shipments to feed their armies, a massive logistical endeavor. An important step towards a modern concept of statehood came in France with the Treaty of Brétigny (1360): the French monarch was henceforth forbidden from selling or partitioning crown lands. The invaders displayed contempt for their hapless foes, while a French national identity developed against the hated 'foreigners,' blamed for mass popular misery in the 1300s-1400s. * The conflict gave birth to the legend of Joan of Arc, a girl who felt called by God to expel the English from France, and who whipped up French feelings of divine fury to fight the English before she was caught and burned alive by English forces.

Image 4.5 Joan of Arc

* Desmond Seward, *The Hundred Years War: The English in France, 1337-1453* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

For Joan of Arc faith in God meant faith in France, a powerful sign that the French monarchy had acquired sacred status in the eyes of commoners. England was eventually defeated, and the French monarch emerged stronger than ever in the 1400s-1500s, instituting permanent taxation to finance Europe's first standing army in peacetime.

Religious and Constitutional Order: War and Revolution in early modern Europe

By 1500, major European kingdoms had developed governing capacities to finance naval expeditions across the globe, which prepared the ground for colonial settlements in the Americas, Asia, and coastal areas of Africa. Despite such political success, core aspects of the European model of statehood (what states are, what states should do) remained unresolved. Did a political territory require religious order? Was it the duty of rulers to enforce religious uniformity on their subjects? Did rulers have the right to change their territory's religion? By the end of the 1500s controversies over religious order intersected with another unresolved aspect of European statehood: constitutional order. Did monarchs have not only their traditional right to defend existing customs and law, but to change them? Did assemblies, the consent of which were usually required to raise new taxes, share legislative powers with executives, or would monarchies develop absolutist forms of rule? Reaching settlements on these questions entailed two centuries of (often violent) conflict.

4.1 Concept Definition

Constitutional Order

A political order based on a constitution. Usually based on a written foundational document to specify rights and obligations and also inform norms, expectations and behaviors.

Most affected was the Holy Roman Empire, where political developments took a different turn than in the monarchies of Western Europe. After repeated conflicts over imperial succession, the Empire agreed the Golden Bull (1346) in which the Holy Roman Emperor was to be elected by a majority vote in a college of princes and archbishops. The Emperor was recognized as superior but bound by customs and law that allowed territories to refuse to apply some imperial decisions. In the political void, princes attempted to subject all persons in their territory to their own rule. When pastor Martin Luther posted his 95 theses condemning Catholic practices in 1517, many German princes rallied to his call for a Protestant Reformation. Luther demanded that they reform the church and destroy papal power in Germany. This presented a serious challenge to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who was also King of Spain. Lutheranism gained rapid ground, and so too did the teachings of John

Calvin, who set up a repressive Calvinist theocracy in Geneva, where heretics were burned at the stake.

4.m Concept Definition

Theocracy

A system of rule based on ultimate power resting with God. God's representatives on Earth rule on his behalf.

Luther argued that only one faith should be allowed within a territory; those who rejected it should emigrate. War broke out between German Protestant and Catholic lands. After a Protestant victory, the Peace of Augsburg (1555) allowed princes to choose their territory's religion – this became known as *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, their religion).

Conflict over religious order spread throughout Europe in the 1500s, prompting government repression, civil war, and widespread death and misery. Spain had increased officially-sanctioned religious violence even before the Protestant Reformation, launching the Spanish Inquisition in 1478 to identify and prosecute heretics. The French king called for local parliaments to hunt down Protestants through the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1540, which contributed to one of the bloodiest anti-Protestant acts of popular violence during the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. The arch-Catholic Mary Tudor ascended the English throne, restored Catholicism and executed Protestants for heresy, earning the moniker 'Bloody Mary'. On the other side, John Knox, a Scottish radical, launched the first successful Calvinist revolution in 1557, proclaiming a Christian duty to resist tyranny. In 1566, Dutch noblemen's request for a policy of toleration was rejected by the Spanish king and popular uprisings and iconoclastic furies on Catholic images and effigies swept the Low Countries. This started a series of civil wars commonly known as the Eighty Years' War. After declaring independence from the Spanish Crown in 1581, Spain recognized this independence in 1648. This new Dutch Republic became the wealthiest country in Europe over the course of the seventeenth century.

Religious violence was only quelled when leaders adopted policies of toleration inspired by a new intellectual tradition that argued that it was not the role of government to enforce religious uniformity. Sebastian Castellión, a Huguenot (French Protestant) helped introduce the concept. While some promoted toleration for practical reasons, Castellión turned toleration into a moral virtue. He emphasized the importance of doubt, arguing that belief could never be absolutely certain. It followed that killing based on belief was ungodly. When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, she reverted the kingdom back to Protestantism but ruled with moderation on the religious question. In France cooler heads prevailed when King Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes (1598) that Protestantism would be tolerated by the French monarchy. The Edict, the key primary source in this chapter, remained in effect until Louis XIV (the ‘Sun King’) revoked it in 1685. The significance of the Edict of Nantes was that it signaled the separation of civil from religious rights and guaranteed a measure of religious freedom. It provided a way out of the religious strife that had plagued the country.

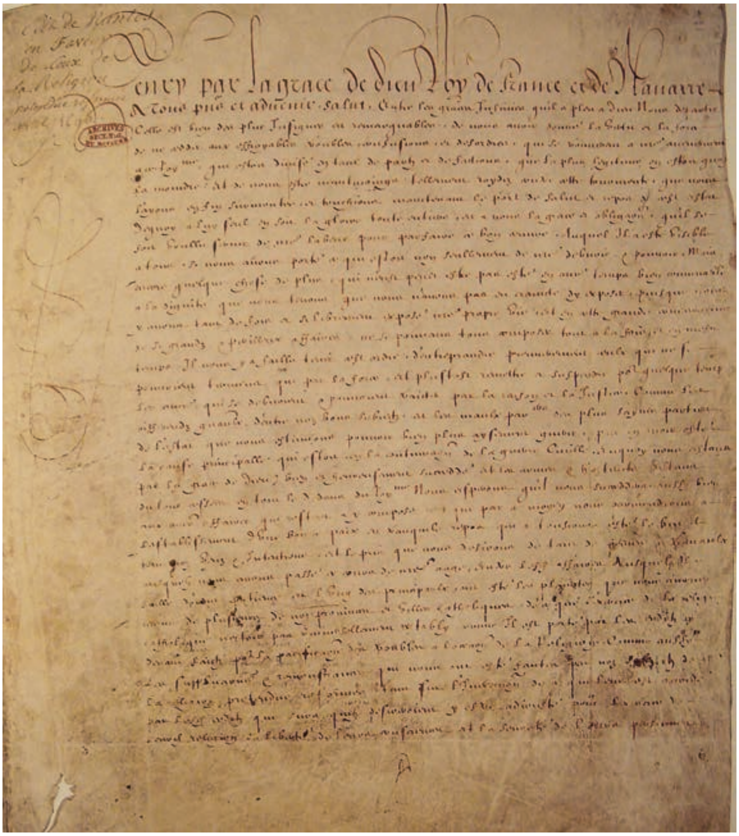

Image 4.6 Edict of Nantes

Where protestants were in power, they often demonstrated the same intolerance as Catholic rulers, but where they were a minority, like in France, they came to support religious toleration. Religious minorities were attracted to the second major challenge to statehood in early modern Europe: constitutionalism. In England, constitutionalism developed both as a battle of King versus Parliament and of Catholicism versus Protestantism, as protestants sought to block the monarch from restoring Catholicism.* Parliament executed King Charles I and established a republican Commonwealth in the English Civil War, though this soon descended

* Jonathan Scott, *England’s Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

into an authoritarian Protectorate. In this context, Thomas Hobbes developed a secular defense of monarchical power in *The Leviathan* (1651), arguing that a strong state was necessary to maintain order. In 1660, the monarchy was restored, but parliament was divided between Whigs (supporters of constitutional monarchy) and Tories (advocates of royal power). England's century of revolution concluded with the Glorious Revolution (1688) so celebrated by Locke, which created a constitutional monarchy and the English Bill of Rights. Despite the civil liberties it contained, the English Bill of Rights banned Catholics from holding public office.

In the meantime, religious conflict returned to the Holy Roman Empire, where questions of religious and constitutional order became intertwined in the apocalyptic Thirty Years War (1618-1648).* Approximately 40% of the German population died in this war of famine, plague, displacement, and even cannibalism. Originally a battle between Catholics and Protestants that broke out in Bohemia, it evolved into a war between Habsburg Emperors and German princes. The Emperor tried to use the conflict to impose 'absolute rule' over princes, asserting his right

Image 4.7 Peace of Westphalia

* Robert von Friedeburg, *Luther's Legacy: The Thirty Years War and the Modern Notion of 'State' in the Empire, 1530s to 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

to depose princes, impose Catholicism on Protestant lands, expropriate Protestant estates, and alter laws at will without approval of the Imperial Diet or parliament. This cross of religious and political conflict then became international with the interventions of Cardinal Richelieu's France and King Gustav Adolphus of Sweden. Enemies of the Habsburgs, they turned the tide of war against the Emperor. The war concluded with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which resolved questions of religious order by granting local German rulers the right to select their territory's religion but mandated toleration in all territories (though only for Calvinism, Catholicism and Lutheranism). The previous German constitutional order of shared sovereignty between local territories and imperial institutions like the Diet and Emperor was confirmed with minor adjustments.

Conclusion

Political order in Europe took the form of a state-based system that developed from the 1000s to the 1600s, first in England, France, and Spain and then, partly by emulation, in Scandinavia and parts of Central and Eastern Europe. The defeat of universal models of ordering the whole of Europe under a Christian empire by medieval popes and the Holy Roman Empire was a prerequisite for the emergence of a state-based political order, even though the Holy Roman Empire persisted until 1806. The medieval origin of states lay in the creation of a legal and fiscal order, out of which evolved concepts of a permanent state to which subjects owed obedience.

External struggle was important in increasing people's loyalty to the new states, as happened in England and France during the Hundred Years War. Concepts of rulership matured as states gradually emerged out of the personal estates of rulers. The highest duty of a ruler became the defense of the state, rather than personal ambition or defense of the faith. In the 1500s-1600s, an interrelated set of controversies challenged the religious and constitutional order of the emerging states. Out of these struggles sprang concepts of political toleration and, not long after, separation of powers (this term was first coined in 1748 by French political theorist Montesquieu). At the same time, monarchical claims to authority had to compete with the growth of republican ideas, which eventually culminated in the great American and French Revolutions in the late 1700s that put an end to Europe's *ancien regime*.

In other parts of the globe – including areas that fell under European empire – imperial or decentralized models of rule tended to prevail before the 1800s. In the 1900s, the concept of a 'Westphalian order' in international relations, first discussed at length in the nineteenth century, came into widespread use. International relations scholarship typically presents the Peace of Westphalia as a pivotal moment, in which statehood became the highest ordering principle of the international system. Premised on a doctrine of external nonintervention, states were considered formally equal within the international system even though they varied greatly in their ability to assert their will. Locating the origin of this system in Westphalia suffers from anachronism and teleology. A historicist reading of the Westphalian peace negotiations by an international relations scholar reveals that the treaty's international components emerged from French and Swedish intentions to weaken their antagonist, the Holy Roman Empire.* There was no intention to fundamentally reshape the international order. Further, concepts of domestic sovereignty long predated Westphalia, as we have seen, while ideas of international sovereignty in the sense of formal equality of states in the international arena were inventions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.**

Picking apart international relations interpretations of the Peace of Westphalia, as scholars did to 'Whig History,' is only instructive if we are able to replace them with new historical interpretations, as Skinner and De Dijn have done for the concept of freedom. In this case, though, an entirely new interpretation is unnecessary. The main premise of the Westphalian argument – that the international order was evolving towards a states-based system based on formally equal sovereignty – is convincing from a historical perspective as long as it is understood that it did not happen at Westphalia. What is called the 'Westphalian Order' evolved gradually over centuries, like the concept of the state. 'Westphalia' is best considered a metaphor for what was actually a longue durée historical evolution, an important moment, but not the decisive one.

The multiethnic, multilingual Holy Roman Empire continued for another 158 years after Westphalia. Even then, it was replaced first by states that formed part of an imperial Napoleonic order, and then part of a Concert of Europe, which had external intervention, rather than nonintervention, as its defining feature. A states-based system did spread to Latin America through national independence in the early 1800s. Later, in Asia and Africa, a 'third-worldist' project in the 1950s-1970s demanded national independence from European colonialism and the creation of sovereign states as their entry tickets into the international system. At the same time, Western European states were developing supranational institutions, to which they transferred aspects of national sovereignty, in a project known as European integration.

After the European Union (EU) was born in the 1990s, some scholars compared its political order favorably to the Holy Roman Empire because its model of shared sovereignty arguably resembled it.*** The example of the EU contributed to the

* Andreas Osiander, 'Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth,' *International Organization* Vol. 55, No. 2 (2001), pp. 251-287.

** Peter M.R. Stirk, 'The Westphalian Model and Sovereign Equality', *Review of International Studies* Vol. 38, No. 3 (2012), pp. 641-660.

*** Osiander, 'Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth'.

development of regional organizations in other areas of the world, including the African Union, ASEAN and Mercosur (though these organizations are based more on national sovereignty than the EU). Regional organizations attempt to reconcile increasing global interdependence with the continued potence of national demands for independence or autonomy. Machiavelli, we recall in conclusion, claimed that the highest duty of a ruler is to protect his subjects. Whether the state-based system remains the best means of protecting human life in the face of today's challenges like climate change, migration, and terrorism may be one of the most important questions we grapple with in the twenty-first century.

Guiding Questions

1. What contributions did humanists make to the study of history?
2. What is 'Whig History'? Can you think of examples outside of England?
3. How did territorial models of rule conflict with universal models in medieval Europe?
4. How did the concept of the 'state' develop in Europe?
5. What are the main political features in the rise of European kingdoms?
6. How did conflicts over religious order relate to conflicts over constitutional order in early modern Europe?
7. What significance does the Peace of Westphalia (1648) have for international relations?

Guide to Further Reading

- Bartlett, Robert, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). A sweeping journey of conquest, castles, and churches, this book shows how civilizational outward expansion from Frankish lands 'made' Europe in medieval times.
- Canning, Joseph, *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450* (London: Routledge, 2014). A comprehensive synthesis of intellectual and political history about concepts of ruleship in Europe, reaching from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance.
- Collins, James B. *The State in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). An introduction to the political history of France, which emerged as the most powerful early kingdom of early modern Europe.
- Dijn, Annelien de, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020). A conceptual history of 'freedom' from ancient Greece to our modern age, which highlights in particular the importance of the Renaissance and the American and French Revolutions.
- Friedeburg, Robert von, *Luther's Legacy: The Thirty Years War and the Modern Notion of 'State' in the Empire, 1530s to 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). A history of political thought in the Holy Roman Empire, showing how concepts of ruleship intersected with religion during and after the Protestant Reformation and Thirty Years War.
- Greenberg, Janelle, *The Radical Face of the Ancient Constitution: St Edwards 'Laws' in Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). An intellectual history exploring how an imagined 'ancient constitution' of supposedly lost freedoms had revolutionary implications in England's century of revolution in the 1600s.
- Moore, Roger I., *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2008). A social and economic history emphasizing how Europe recovered from economic stagnation and achieved new levels of economic and social development in the High Middle Ages.
- Scott, Jonathan, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). A journey through England's century of revolution, in which ideas of political representation and constitutionalism intersected with religious struggles to topple kings and create constitutional monarchy.
- Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). A history of how political ideas of liberty and ruleship came of age in the city-states of the Italian Renaissance.
- Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Vol. 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Picking up where volume one left off, Skinner explores how political ideas migrated from Italy to Northwestern Europe, where they crystallized in a centuries-long conflict between constitutionalists and absolutists.
- Skinner, Quentin, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). A fascinating intellectual history exploring how Machiavellian ideas of ruleship contributed to Hobbes' concept of a state Leviathan.

- Tilly, Charles, *Coercion, Capital, and European States: AD 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell 2015; Cambridge, Mass., 1992). A millennium long book of historical sociology, Tilly explores how European war and military expenses interacted with capitalism and finance to create our modern model of a state.

CHAPTER 5.

Slavery: Capitalism & Racism

JORIS VAN DEN TOL AND ANNE MARIEKE VAN DER WAL

Introduction

Slavery is not a phenomenon of history. Forms of coerced labor are intimately intertwined with our daily lives. Tomatoes you bought in the supermarket were picked by (illegal) migrants who earn €12 for eight hours of work in the full sun in southern Italy.[*] The hazelnuts in your Nutella were probably picked by one of the circa 900,000 children between the ages of 6 and 14 that are forced to work in Turkey – these children include Syrian refugees that escaped the war.[**] The clothes you wear were likely produced by victims of modern-day slavery and human-trafficking in South-East Asia.[***] A report from the *International Labor Organization* from 2017 estimates – conservatively – that around 25 million people are currently in forced labor.[****] Affordable consumption in a system of globalized production is based on unpaid labor.

When thinking about slavery, many people think of enslaved people picking cotton on a plantation in North America and as something of the past. While the trans-Atlantic slave trade ended in the nineteenth century, slavery continues in many forms. Likewise, slavery did not start when Europeans forcefully transported circa 12-13 million enslaved Africans to the Americas and slave labor occurred not only on plantations, but also in cities and in houses. Moreover, enslaved Africans also ended up in Asia, enslaved Asians labored for Europeans too, and North African ships raided European cities to take men as galley slaves and women as concubines in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.[*****] It is a myth that coerced labor died

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* Neil Howard and Roberto Forin, 'Migrant Workers, "Modern Slavery" and the Politics of Representation,' *Economy and Society* Vol. 48, No. 4 (2019) pp. 579-601.

** Report US DOL 2018: *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor*: *Turkey* Available at: https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2018/Turkey.pdf Last accessed 15 April 2022.

*** Bobby Banerjee, 'Modern Slavery Is an Enabling Condition of Global Neoliberal Capitalism: Commentary on Modern Slavery in Business,' *Business and Society* Vol. 60, No. 2 (2021) pp. 415-419.

**** International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (Geneva: 2017).

***** N.I. Matar, 'Wives, Captive Husbands, and Turks: The First Women Petitioners in Caroline England,' *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* Vol. 23, No.1 (1997) pp. 111-128; R.C. Davis, 'Counting European Slaves on the Barbary Coast,' *Past and Present* Vol. 172 (2001) pp. 87-124; S. Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century', in: K. S. Mathew (ed.), *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans. Studies in Maritime History* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

with the Black Death (ca. 1346-1353) in Medieval Europe; serfdom continued all over continental Europe and was abolished in the Austrian Empire in 1781 and in Russia as late as 1861. As for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, in contrast to popular opinion, the largest share of enslaved Africans was brought not to North America but to Latin America and the Caribbean (see image 5.1). This chapter focuses on slavery and enslaved Africans in Latin America not because it is an exception, but because it is a large window into something that has been a constant in human history. The main argument of this chapter is that inequality has been a perennial feature of societies, while the issue of racism is the product of a specific time and place.

Image 5.1 Volume and direction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from all African to all American regions

Historiography

Notwithstanding slavery's consistency over time and in different places, historians have questioned why trans-Atlantic slavery emerged and ended. One of the most influential publications in this historiographical debate is Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* originally published in 1944.* The Williams thesis, as it has become known, is comprised of three main elements:

1. The economic structure of capitalism replaced slavery once British elites accumulated surplus capital through slavery that was required for the industrial revolution;

* E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery – Third Edition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021).

2. The abolishment of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834 can be explained through the declining economic importance of these colonies at the time because of industrialization;
3. 'Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery'.[*]

In other words, capitalism allowed British elites to extract the necessary money to bankroll the Industrial Revolution.[**] The British colonies in the West Indies produced primarily sugar and tobacco, while cotton was a more important commodity for the emerging industrial economy. This removed economic objections to abolishing slavery in the British West Indies. And thirdly, once the enslaved Africans were no longer socially stratified through slavery, the white population relied on racism to maintain their social position in society.

5.a Concept Definition

Economy

Social arrangements or aspects of social relations that concern the provisioning of (im)material needs and wants, in different forms and social scales (households, local, national and world). Economies share several key features, including social actors (e.g., individuals, firms, and states), institutions (i.e., formal and informal rules), as well as technologies and organizational techniques.

Every element of the Williams thesis has since been scrutinized or criticized.[***] Defenders of humanitarian, ethical, and moral motives in the abolition movement argued that Williams was perhaps too Marxist in his economic interpretation.[****] Historians of racism, furthermore, have attempted to "move away from mechanistic economic explanations [...] to show the evolution of racist thinking from feudalism to capitalism".[*****] Others criticized Williams' reliance of the thesis on only English sources and questioned the profitability of slavery – after all, in order for the European elites to extract surplus to finance industrialization, slavery needed to yield surplus in the first place.[******] Notwithstanding a possible decrease in profitability of British

[*] Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 9.
[**] The concept of capitalism has been introduced in chapter three.
[***] Pepijn Brandon, 'Rethinking Capitalism and Slavery: New perspectives from American debates,' *Tijdschrift voor Sociaal Economische Geschiedenis* Vol. 12, No.4 (2015) pp. 117-137; Pepijn Brandon, 'From Williams's Thesis to Williams Thesis: An Anti-Colonial Trajectory,' *International Review of Social History* Vol. 62, No.2 (2017) pp. 305-327.
[****] Thomas Bender (ed), *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1992). Marxism will be further elaborated in chapter 7.
[*****] James H. Sweet, 'The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No.1 (1997), pp. 143-166, p. 144.
[******] D. Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); S.H.H. Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Gainesville: Florida University Press,

West Indian sugar colonies, examples from the slave-based economies of Cuba and Brazil in the nineteenth century demonstrated that – beyond the British Empire – sugar productions in Cuba and coffee production in Brazil remained very profitable. The consensus among historians, for now, seems to be that although the Williams thesis describes the situation in a British context quite adequately, it cannot be transposed to other empires. For slave-based colonies in Brazil and Cuba in the nineteenth century, historians now use the term 'Second Slavery', to describe the processes and mechanisms of industrialization that went hand in hand with slavery.*

Theories and methods

Whether or not slavery was profitable for European elites and fueled industrialization – and thus contributed to the Great Divergence between Europe and Asia – it provides us with an opportunity to discuss this history with a focus on Brazil in a global context.

5.b Concept Definition

The Great Divergence

Historians use the term 'The Great Divergence' to describe the process where Europe's GDP per capita grew much faster than the GDP per capita of the rest of the world. While before roughly 1800 all places in the world were equally prosperous, and perhaps China was the wealthiest part of the world, Europe – in particular Britain – diverged from the rest of the world after 1800.

One of the problems of studying slavery in the period before 1800 is that there are very few primary sources made by enslaved people; the bulk of the archival material is created by slaveholders, which creates an inherent bias in the source material.

5.1 The Study of History

Bias

A prejudice against someone or something that leads to unfair attention or representation in research.

2002); F.H. Cardoso, *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional: O negro na sociedade escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1962).

* D. Tomich and M. Zeuske, 'Introduction, the Second Slavery: Mass Slavery, World-Economy, and Comparative Microhistories,' *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* Vol. 31, No.2 (2008) pp. 91-100.

Slaveholders recorded what they thought was of interest (e.g., name, age, marital status) but they were generally less interested in the ideas or practices of the enslaved people; that is, unless their ideas or practices intervened with the economic interests of the slaveholders. Therefore, these primary sources have an overrepresentation of rebellions and runaways (maroons).

A second problem comes with the interpretation of primary sources about slavery. An example of a source that has survived and that allows historians to say something about colonial societies and the interactions between European slaveholders and enslaved Africans are baptismal records. In these baptismal records it is possible to see who were the father and mother of a new-born. What these records mean is open to interpretation. For example, a historian finds in the baptismal records three instances where one free European fathered a child with the same enslaved woman. Traditionally, historians might interpret this as evidence of a harmonious relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved; the man seemed to care for the woman as he repeatedly had a child with her. More recently, historians have emphasized that the structural circumstances of slavery make harmonious relationships between slaveholder and enslaved very unlikely. If the enslaved woman did not want to have sex with the man, her position did not give her many options; if she refused or resisted, her owner could rape her as she was his property. Acknowledging that structural systems and practices such as laws, policies, and regulations limited the agency of the enslaved and black population in a society and thus influenced the historical records, shapes the interpretation of these records.

Objects

This chapter focuses on the global connections of Dutch Brazil through objects, people, and ideas. The story of the key primary source for this chapter does not start in Latin America, but instead commences in Germany, in the small town of Siegen. There, a church, the *Nikolaikirche*, holds a silver baptismal basin. How did this basin end up in this church, and what does it have to do with slavery?

Close inspection of the silver basin reveals the numbers '1586', the letters 'PHI', and around the edge are shown a series of camel-like figures. The numbers refer to the year it was likely produced, and the letters refer to Philip II King of Spain (r. 1556-1598) who in 1586 was the sovereign of the Habsburg Empire. The camel-like animals are in fact llamas and the engravings resemble other works of indigenous artists from a Spanish colony: the viceroyalty of Peru. The silver mines of Potosí were located in this viceroyalty, and through *mita* – a type of unfree labor by the indigenous population – the Spanish Crown extracted the silver required to create the basin. Some of the

Image 5.2 Baptismal basin (Taufschale) from the Nikolaikirche in Siegen, Germany

freshly-mined silver was transported to Spain, some of it was transported directly to the Ming empire in East Asia, and some was used to create cultural artefacts in situ.[*]

After its creation in Peru in the sixteenth century, the basin ended up in the hands of Portuguese merchants who dominated the slave trade between West Africa and the Spanish colonies. These Portuguese merchants used it as a means of payment and exchanged it for slaves in São Paulo de Luanda – in what is present-day Angola. Here it ended up in the hands of Dom Garcia II, the King of Kongo (r. 1641-1661).[**] Dom Garcia II wished to expel the Portuguese from his Kingdom and forged a strategic alliance with the Dutch. By 1630, the Dutch had captured North-eastern Brazil from the Portuguese, but required access to the African slave markets to obtain the labor force for their sugar plantations.[***] In the diplomatic gift exchanges Dom Garcia II offered Johan Maurits, the count of Nassau-Siegen and the Governor-General of Dutch Brazil (r. 1637-1644) two-hundred slaves, a necklace, and the silver basin. Johan Maurits' counter-gift was equally valuable, as it was important to maintain good relations with the King of Kongo because he provided the access to this part of the African slave market.[****] According to a 1640 report by a Dutch official, enslaved people coming from Kongo were the most sought-after, while those from the Kingdom of Ardra (in present-day Benin) were 'often angry' and ran away. Moreover, 'the negroes from Guinea to Sierra Leone and Cape Verde do

* D.O. Flynn and A. Giráldez, 'Born with a "Silver Spoon": The Origin of World Trade in 1571,' *Journal of World History* Vol. 6, No.2 (1995) pp. 201-221.

** M. Françozo, 'Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen's Collection of Curiosities,' in: M. van Groesen (ed.), *The Legacy of Dutch Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 105-123.

*** C. Boxer, *The Dutch in Brazil* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957) pp. 82-88.

**** Françozo, 'Johan Maurits,' 110.

not work very hard', but they were 'neater' and therefore better suited as household slaves – particularly 'the womenfolk'.*

The diplomatic gift exchanges between Dom Garcia II and Johan Maurits were beneficial for both parties. Without military support from the Kingdom of Kongo the Dutch would be unable to fight the Portuguese for access to the African slave market. Without competition from the Dutch, the Portuguese would be the only buyers (*Monopsony*) of enslaved Africans on this part of the coast, which would be a bad deal for the sellers from the Kingdom of Kongo. The Europeans were militarily inferior and relied on African rulers like Dom Garcia II tolerating European forts and trading posts. Moreover, the Europeans relied on military assistance from African allies to settle intra-European conflicts. Europeans (e.g., the Portuguese or the Dutch) had to pay tribute to African rulers to maintain their position on the coast, and it was not until after the Industrial Revolution that Europeans were able to venture beyond coastal forts and penetrate the African hinterland. African rulers and African slave sellers knew very well who could supply the best goods to exchange for slaves and there was no shortage of Europeans competing with each other. African merchants selling slaves preferred Swedish iron over iron from Liège for example, and could easily differentiate between (and had very strong preference for) European and Indian textiles. As such, the consumption preferences on the African continent dictated which goods the Europeans supplied and who was allowed to buy slaves.**

Image 5.3 Johan Maurits posing with a black servant in 1666, by Pieter Nason

* Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, The Netherlands (NL-HaNA), 1.05.01.01 Archief Oude WIC, inv. nr. *46*, [scans 242-243].

** C. Evans and G. Rydén, ''Voyage Iron': An Atlantic Slave Trade Currency, its European Origins, and West African Impact', *Past and Present* Vol. 239 (2018), pp. 41-70; J. Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990) p. 86-89, 96-97.

After his tenure as Governor-General ended in 1644, Johan Maurits returned to Europe and took the silver basin for a third trip across the Atlantic as part of his collection. Johan Maurits took up residence in the Mauritshuis – the building in The Hague that is currently a museum that hosts *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* and other famous paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt and others. Not long after his return, Johan Maurits proudly presented the silver basin as part of his collection that further included paintings by Frans Post and half-naked dancing indigenous Brazilians. A few years later, Johan Maurits and his collection of curiosities moved to Kleve in present-day Germany, where there is evidence his collection also included "moors" (Africans). This is not altogether surprising considering he traded, lent, and owned enslaved Africans in Brazil.[*] In 1658, Johan Maurits presented the basin – that now included his coat of arms – to the *Nicolaikirche* in Siegen and in doing so connected that area of his dynastic rights to Africa and Latin America.[**]

People

The human connection between Latin America and the rest of the world is most clearly illustrated through the large-scale decimation of original populations through the arrival of European colonists and the arrival of enslaved people from Africa in Latin America. It is estimated that after the landings of Spanish conquistadors, between 60-90% of the local populations perished in a large scale pandemic, which has become known as 'The Great Dying', already discussed in chapter 1.[***] To substitute the lack of labor force, Portuguese and Spanish colonists began importing enslaved people to work in their newly founded colonies. The most important source for estimations of the number of transported enslaved Africans is the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.[****] This TSTD estimates that between 1500 and 1866, 12.5 million enslaved Africans disembarked a ship. The majority (5.5 million or ca. 44%) ended up in Brazil and 1.6 million (ca. 12%) in Spanish America, meaning that more than half of the enslaved Africans were sold in Latin America. It dwarfs the share of North America (less than 500,000) and Europe (ca. 10,000) and the remaining enslaved Africans disembarked in the Caribbean and other parts of Africa.

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* C. Monteiro and E. Odegard, 'Slavery at the Court of the 'Humanist Prince' Reexamining Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen and his Role in Slavery, Slave Trade and Slave-smuggling in Dutch Brazil,' *Journal of Early American History* Vol. 10, No.1 (2020), pp. 3-32.

** Françozo, 'Johan Maurits,' 115-119.

*** Alexander Koch et al., "Earth System Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492," *Quaternary Science Reviews*, Vol. 207 (1 March 2019), pp. 13-36. The exact percentage is subject to scientific debate.

**** Available at: www.slavevoyages.org Last accessed 15 April 2022.

The unfree labor force in Latin America was not exclusively enslaved people from sub-Sahara Africa. It also included small numbers of enslaved people from the Ottoman Empire and the North African Coast (then called the Barbary Coast), as well as indentured laborers from Europe.[*] Indentured servitude was a form of unfree labor where the European poor agreed to work on a plantation for a certain number of years (often seven) in exchange for transport across the Atlantic and a plot of land in the Americas after their servitude ended. However, after arrival the employer often found excuses to extend their servitude beyond the initially agreed-upon term. Even though these other unfree laborers and many white European colonists also ended up in Latin America, the largest outside population were the enslaved Africans.

By the time the Europeans purchased enslaved people on the African coast, these people had often already travelled great distances. Often by foot or by barge, they had been brought as slaves to the coast from the hinterland.[**] Many had been made slaves as a result of warfare, kidnapping, court ruling, or debt. Although the practice of enslavement existed in Africa prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the increased demand for slaves by Europeans meant that more Africans were enslaved than before. Europeans were not the only buyers, and high local demand meant that (at least through the second half of the seventeenth century) only a minority of the enslaved were put aboard European ships for export. While enslaved women could quite easily be absorbed in the slave population of groups such as the Akwamu on the African Gold Coast, it was particularly the enslaved male population who – because they were considered less valuable – were sold to the Europeans.[***]

Once the European ships were full with human cargo, they departed for the long and dangerous trans-Atlantic journey. Notwithstanding the economic incentive to keep the enslaved cargo alive, the journey was especially perilous for the enslaved because of diseases such as dysentery that easily spread below deck, harsh treatment and violence by the crew, despair, hunger strikes, suicide, mutiny, and pirates and privateers. Men and women were generally separated, with men being kept below deck in chains the entire journey, while women had more freedom. This sounds better for the enslaved women than it actually was. What the men endured in physical punishment, the women endured in the crew's sexual desires through rape. It is telling that the female slave quarter on the ships was commonly referred to as 'the whore hole'.[****]

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* J. van den Tol, *Lobbying in Company* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 73-74.

** B.W. Kankpeyeng, 'The Slave Trade in Northern Ghana: Landmarks, Legacies and Connections,' *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 30, No.2 (2009), pp. 209-221.

*** S.E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 27-28.

**** Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 241-243; J. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Upon arrival in the Americas and Caribbean, the enslaved were considered able-bodied if they could walk off the ships without support. The women, children, and less-abled were sold at a discount at auction. Purchasers were often careful to separate families and ethnic and linguistic groups in order to limit the possibilities of the enslaved for organizing resistance.

Leaving the auction with their buyer, the enslaved could end up in roughly four different situations. The first two options meant the enslaved stayed in the cities. This type of urban slavery meant they either worked as servants or did physically demanding jobs such as a porter in the harbor. The enslaved in the cities were bought by private individuals as well as by religious institutions and colonial governments. Colonial governments also used some of the enslaved Africans to increase their armies, which – notwithstanding its risks on the battlefield – at least offered the enslaved a path to manumission. The fourth option for the enslaved was to be put to work in the mines or on a plantation. In countries such as Brazil and Cuba, a large part of the plantations were sugar plantations.

Sugar was made from sugar cane that was harvested with slave labor that happened around the clock. During the day, the cane was harvested and transported to a sugar mill (*engenho*). At the end of the afternoon the mill grinding started, which produced a juice that was boiled in kettles until around ten in the morning. The enslaved labored for 18 to 20 hours a day and the work in the fields and the mills was gendered. The men cut the sugar cane, chopping the tops, taking off the leaves, and cutting the stalks close to the ground. Women bundled the cane together and loaded it on oxcarts for transportation to the mill.[*] As can be seen in the legend of an image from the mid-seventeenth century, the men manned the oxen that powered the rollers and fed the cane to the rollers. Then, the women carried the ground cane away, while other women poured the juice in a wooden pipe connected to the boiling house. The juice was boiled in multiple copper kettles of different size and temperature that were usually manned by men. After the final boil, the sugar syrup was poured into a clay pot to harden, and afterwards emerged inverted in their characteristic sugarloaf shape.[**] This product was then transported to Europe – particularly Amsterdam and Hamburg – to be further processed in sugar refineries before being brought to market.

The forced transportation of a large number of enslaved Africans to the Americas by Europeans introduced new diseases as well as new cultural expressions. While many diseases were endemic in Europe and Africa, there is evidence that suggests that malaria spread mainly from Africa to the Americas aboard European slave

* S. B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 100-109.

** Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations*, p. 116-21.

Image 5.4 A drawing by Frans Post of a sugar mill (engenho) in Pernambuco, Brazil from the middle of the seventeenth century

ships, and the same goes for variants of other diseases such as hepatitis B.* Battling these various pathogens required cooperation, the exchange of information, and contributions from Africans, European traders and surgeons, planters, medical doctors and many others. Malaria was only successfully remedied – all across the Atlantic basin – by quinine made from Peruvian bark.** Other lasting legacies of slavery in Latin America are found in a variety of cultural expressions that enslaved Africans brought with them to the Americas. Two such legacies in Brazil are *Quilombos* and *Candomblé*.

It was not rare for enslaved Africans to try escape the harsh work on plantations. For example, during errands to another plantation or in a city or under the cover of darkness at night, enslaved Africans tried their luck at living away from a plantation. It was also not rare that after a short period of maybe three weeks, a runaway, or so-called *maroon*, returned to their plantation. This could be because of the difficulties of feeding oneself in the wild, missing one's family, or a range of

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* Rodrigo Barquera et al., "Origin and Health Status of First-Generation Africans from Early Colonial Mexico," *Current Biology*, Vol. 30, No. 11 (8 June 2020), pp. 2078-2091.

** Manuel Barcia, *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 12-16.

different reasons, but whatever the reason for returning, the reward was usually hard physical punishment. The runaways that succeeded in surviving outside the plantation often formed maroon settlements far away in the hinterland, which in Brazil were called *quilombos* or *macambos* if they were smaller. The European colonists lived mostly on the coastal areas and along rivers of the Americas, laying only a paper claim to the areas further inland. In Brazil, the most famous and largest quilombo was *Palmares*.

Notwithstanding untiring attempts by both Dutch and Portuguese colonizing powers, Palmares existed for probably the entire seventeenth century in the hinterland of the present-day state of Alagoas, not too far from the European settlements in Recife and Salvador. Consisting of two large *mocambos* with many smaller settlements around it and a population between 11,000 and 20,000 Africans made Palmares less a town and more like a 'neo-African kingdom' in Brazil.[*] Its organization was based on a number of African forms of political and social organization which it combined with European elements and specific local adaptations. At the head of the society was a king in the African tradition. Within Palmares slavery existed, runaways lived in freedom, but enslaved Africans captured during raids remained in bondage. Traditions from Angola (or the kingdom of Ndongo) seemed to have been dominant in this society, but there is archaeological evidence that there was also a large influence from Amerindian societies.[**]

In Palmares, as well as in European settlements, the enslaved Africans predominantly practiced a religion that was a fusion between (European) Christian and African elements. Enslaved Africans brought with them African spiritual traditions that were as diverse as the areas in Africa where they originated. In the early nineteenth century, the African and Catholic traditions solidified in a combined, syncretic, religion called *Candomblé*.[***] In this belief system there is all-powerful God (*Oludumaré*) served by lesser deities called *orixas*. The orixas have names and attributes comparable to West African gods, and can be equated to Catholic saints. For example, *Oxóssi*, the male orixá of hunting, was linked to St. George who is normally depicted on a horse while slaying a dragon.[****] Unlike Catholicism though, Candomblé has no central authority, but it is organized through autonomous groups.

The arrival of enslaved Africans and free and indentured Europeans in the Americas introduced to the Americas new cultural and religious expressions, as well as new pathogens. Notions about what was feminine or masculine work on a

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* S. B. Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 120-23.

** A. C. Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 273.

*** The concept of syncretism will be elaborated in chapter 6.

**** Sheila Walker, 'Every day and Esoteric Reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé', *History of Religions*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1999), pp. 103-128, p. 111-12.

plantation was often formed by European traditions, and maroons built their societal structure based on certain African political and societal customs. The repeated exchanges between Europeans, Africans, and indigenous American groups led to new cultural expressions that were unique to Latin America.

Racism

The question, as it arose at the start of this chapter, whether racism led to the enslavement of predominantly Africans versus racism being the result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, has long been discussed within academia, but has more recently found resonance within societal debates on the legacies of colonialism. To many descendants of enslaved Africans living currently in the Americas, the thought of a lack of pan-African solidarity based on a shared sense of 'race' within Africa during the period of trans-Atlantic slave trade, is painful to contemplate. Yet, this anachronistic understanding of this history is a reflection of the social reality in which these African-American communities found and continue to find themselves. It was in the 'New World', where the concept of "race" first arose and became much more important, as opposed to it having been important for seventeenth- or eighteenth-century African societies. Certain prejudices concerning 'the other' have always existed and shaped the expectations and actual relations between different communities. Hierarchies within societies, as well as between societies, were deemed a natural given for much of human history. Several historians have pointed out that as far back as antiquity, 'ethnic' stereotypes existed about almost all the different regions within the then known world, and that many of the theories which fed such prejudice came from ideas about the effect of climate on behavioral patterns as well as physical appearances.[*] In this antiquated Hippocratic environmental determinism, and what some scholars call 'proto-racist'[**] reasoning, ancient societies likes the Greeks for instance thought of Ethiopians being dark skinned caused by the scorching of the sun.[***] This climate theory of human difference was also dominant among medieval Arab scholars, who viewed black Africans as less 'civilized' due to their proximity to the Equator, which was thought to make "their temperaments hot and their humors fiery, their color black and their hair woolly", which was seen to cause a lack of "self-control and steadiness of mind and [they]

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* Claire Weeda, 'Ethnic Identification and Stereotypes in Western Europe, circa 1100-1300', *History Compass*, Vol.12, No.7 (2014), pp. 586-606.

** B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). D. McCoskey, *Race: Antiquity and its Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

*** Rebecca Futo Kennedy, 'Airs, Waters, Metals, Earth. People and Environment in Archaic and Classical Greek Thought', in: Rebecca Futo Kennedy and Molly Jones-Lewis (eds) *Routledge Handbook to Identity and the Environment* (London: Routledge: 2016), p. 21.

are overcome by fickleness, foolishness and ignorance".* At the same time, such obvious xenophobic or proto-racist prejudiced beliefs usually did not consider these characteristics to be hereditary, and as such biologically deterministic (one of the key features of racist ideology). Moreover, since the debate about Darwin's evolutionary theory, we know that evolution does not follow a purposeful and linear progress, but that evolution is random and most importantly neutral. There is no survival of the fittest, only random selection of certain genetic traits which have been able to survive or even become dominant within a particular group of people due to reproductive success. Yet, the idea of some groups of people having developed into more 'perfect' versions of humanity is ancient, universal, persistent and difficult to eradicate. Over the course of time, this belief in a more 'perfect human' or a 'higher civilization' has surfaced whenever it could be used to someone's advantage.

For example, in the wake of the Inquisition and the Reconquista (i.e. the war between Christian kingdoms and the Umayyad Caliphate over the control of the Iberian peninsula), the concept of 'purity of blood' had become a dominant factor in the Iberian peninsula for determining social status and allocating official roles in the governing of the state. This bloodline obsession was mainly concerned with the religious, and to some extent ethnic, ancestry of families.** Having Jewish or 'Moorish', i.e. Muslim ancestry, in one's family ancestry was deemed suspicious in a time of absolute religious intolerance. By some scholars labelled as the 'invention of racial exclusion laws'***, this prejudice became institutionalized and legalized starting in 1449 through the Sentencia-Estatuto declaration, which forbade converted (to Catholicism) Jews from holding public offices (being Jewish was completely prohibited during this time and punishable by death or exile).**** The Spanish and Portuguese brought their social ordering based on 'casta' or 'limpieza', meaning lineage and purity of blood, with them to their colonial territories in the Americas. From 1552 Iberian immigrants to the Spanish territories in the New World were even required to produce proof of their bloodlines in order to be eligible for settlement or public office.***** Here, however, the casta, or castes as it became known in English, became more and more associated with the color of one's complexion as opposed to a religious and/or 'ethnic' heritage, as those who were considered not 'pure-

* Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) p. 36. Cited in: Sweet, *Iberian Roots*, p. 146.

** Maria Elena Martinez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2008), p. 265.

*** Jeffrey Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad. The Jewish Millennium in Spain* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), p. 311. See also: Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalistic Ideas In Europe* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996).

**** Gregory B. Kaplan, 'The Inception of Limpieza de Sangre (purity of Blood) and Its Impact in Medieval and Golden Age Spain', in: Amy Aronson-Friedman and Gregory B. Kaplan, *Marginal Voices. Studies in Converso Literature of Medieval and Golden Age Spain*, Vol. 46. (2012), pp. 19-41.

***** Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad.* p. 331.

Image 5.5 Albert Eckhout, 'Esposa Tupi' (c. 1640)

Image 5.6 Albert Eckhout, 'Esposa Mameluca' (c. 1640)

blooded Christians' were either native-American or of African descent. As such, the social classes soon became 'racial' classes, and a 'color-line' was invented which had previously not been part of 'ethnic' stereotyping per se. As in any situation of classification and ordering, the borders were never absolute and remained to some extent fluid and often depended on economic status as well as social perceptions. Nevertheless, a seed had been planted in the minds of European colonizers that social standing depended on someone's 'racial' lineage.[*] Moreover, the 'Latin-American' model of plantation slavery, "of lifetime, inheritable servitude" was deemed profitable and the Spanish and Portuguese economic success coveted by other European colonists, which meant that the British and other European settlers, who started settling in the Americas and engaging in the Transatlantic slave trade a century after the Spanish and Portuguese, saw no need to invent a new system or model of slavery.[**]

* G. Frederickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 31-35.

** Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism. Essays on the Colonial Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 145. Cited in: Gorsky, *Exiles in Sepharad*, p. 337. See also: J.H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America. 1492-1830* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2020).

Coincidently, the emergence of 'racial' thinking coalesced with an artistic revolution which is called 'the art of describing' in the seventeenth century.* This genre of art in which nature was sought to be depicted as honestly and faithfully as possible, as opposed to the depiction of the world based on a more mythical or spiritual interpretation of reality, was part of a broader scientific and artistic development, which commenced with the Renaissance and was further influenced by the Enlightenment, with its increased appreciation for empiricism. Humankind came to be seen as part of the natural world, and as such should be studied and depicted realistically rather than philosophically. The many voyages of 'discovery' in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries not only encouraged scientists to study and analyze the newly encountered flora, fauna and peoples, but also this accumulation of 'new' (from a European perspective) knowledge was visually recorded. One such example is the patronage of arts and science by the Governor General of Dutch Brazil, Johan Maurits, who has already been introduced above, see also image 5.3. He commanded, for instance, the *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* (1648), the first scientific work on the natural history of Brazil, by naturalist Willem Piso. Additionally, Maurits ordered two painters, Albert Eckhout and Frans Post, to visually record the landscapes and peoples living in Dutch Brazil. This earliest known series of paintings of Brazil (see images 5.5 and 5.6) clearly depicts the 'exoticism' of 'the other' and the desire to find and apply order to the natural world as well as to the human world by labelling and categorizing everything and everyone encountered.**

In some parts of Spanish America, in particular in Mexico, societal anxiety of 'racial-mixing' had led to the development of the aforementioned Casta painting genre, which served not only to visually represent 'reality' but also to inform society on the supposed inherent characteristics of each 'racial' caste. This visual categorizing was, however, not neutral, as Spanish males were always depicted as being most civilized, protective and as 'possessors of culture', as opposed to native Americans or Africans, who were mostly depicted as being less civilized. Societies' obsession with Casta (lineage) becomes even more clear from the general warnings of the believed degeneration caused by 'racial mixing', obviously present in most Casta paintings, which in the colonial mind led to "the contraction of debased sentiments, immoral proclivities, and ability to a decivilized state".*** As such, those visual productions of the perceived reality, in South America, were part of a colonial

* Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, 'Science and Art in the Dutch Period in Northeast Brazil: The representation of cannibals and Africans as allies overseas', *Circumscribere*, Vol. 7 (2009), pp. 37-47, p. 37. S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 163.

** Benjamin Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

*** Ilona Katzew, 'Casta Painting: Identity and Social Stratification in Colonial Mexico', in: Catalog for the exhibition New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America, organized by the Americas Society Art Gallery, Sept. 26-Dec. 22, 1996, p. 29.

discourse of regulation and control of the social order, objectifying non-Europeans and putting forward justifications for the continued dominance of European control over the 'New World'.*

5.c Concept Definition

Racism

The belief that the human population can be biologically categorized in clear and distinct groups, i.e. 'races', which have inherited and essential characteristics that define their behavior and abilities, and that these differences mark a 'natural' and inevitable inferiority or superiority.

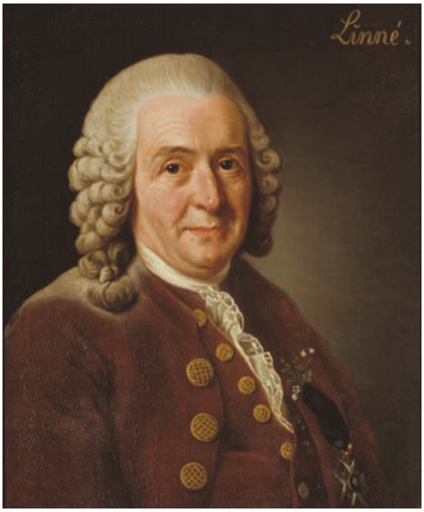

Image 5.7 Carl Linnaeus

Seeing cultural or physical differences as being fixed and hereditary, so in other words biological as opposed to contextual and fluid, turned into a deterministic and normative understanding by attributing an integral value to these differences. A turning point was when prejudice and othering became racism. Most scholars agree that racism as a belief or ideology is a modern phenomenon and arose, paradoxically, as a consequence of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Due to the discoveries of previously unknown and undescribed plants and animals, scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth century embraced empiricism as the foremost way to knowledge production, and in the process challenged the then dominant religious dogmas about the world. This newly embraced scientific method

* Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

of observation and experiment led to the modernization of several fields of science such as Anatomy and Botany.

Andreas Vesalius' revolutionary work *Fabric of the Human Body* (1543) introduced new ways of measuring and analyzing the human body, laying the groundwork for understanding humans as biological beings. Carl Linnaeus, often called the 'father of taxonomy', led the way with the publication of his work *Systema Naturae* in 1735 for showing the order in nature and the possibility of discovering the natural laws which underpinned such order.

This frantic quest to scientifically understand and analyze humankind as part of nature, ultimately led to the taxonomizing of human 'types' as 'natural kinds'* of which Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775) is perhaps one of the earliest and most striking examples. Whereas the proclivity for classifications was not per se normative, it nonetheless gained a hierarchical and normative outlook due to the association many intellectuals at the time made between sub-Saharan Africans and an enslaved condition.** Indeed, when philosophers like Hume, Kant, Voltaire or Rousseau formulated their thoughts on the equality of all human beings, and as such questioned the age-old belief of the naturalness of inequality between humans, they sought a rational and objective explanation for the inequality they witnessed around them, and believed it to be explained by, among others, the biological adaptability of certain human populations.

This paradox of the Enlightenment, where concepts of equality and meritocracy allowed ideas of 'race-as-biology' to develop simultaneously, can thus not be separated from the time in which it arose, one in which trans-Atlantic slavery existed. Notwithstanding its unintentional contribution to racial ideas, the Enlightenment also contributed ideas that challenged an existing world order that was based on the God-given right of some to rule over many, and gave rise to such famous slogans of the French Revolution as *liberté, egalité, fraternité* that led history-altering revolutions, including abolition (of slavery) movements in the Americas and in Europe.

Ideas

One of the most famous beaches in the world is the Copacabana in Rio de Janeiro. On both ends of the beach are historical forts: *Forte Duque de Caxias* from 1779 and *Forte de Copacabana* from 1914. The latter is currently a museum and on the outside

* Justin E. H. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 11-12.

** Devin Vartjia, *The Color of Equality, Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press: 2021) p. 199.

visitors can see a mural that depicts the Battle of Guararapes, which was part of the "War of Divine Liberty".* An accompanying sign in Portuguese explains the mural to visitors not intimately acquainted with the historical significance of this particular battle: 'people of diverse origins, different social classes, *negros*, *brancos*, and *indios* came together for a common cause: defending their ground and their families against an invader'; the sign continues to say that these *patriotas* obtained 'a victory without precedent'. Perhaps surprisingly, this idyllic story of all different groups coming together to fight a common enemy is not the story of Brazilian independence in 1822, but the story of Portuguese colonizers fighting Dutch colonizers in a global geopolitical struggle in the seventeenth century.

5.d Concept Definition

Geopolitics

Approach to international affairs which focuses on the interplay between geography, power and politics.

There were European, black, and indigenous soldiers fighting on both sides, and for the majority of the enslaved population the transfer from Dutch to Portuguese rules meant little change in the day-to-day reality of living under an extractive and racist capitalist system. The color of the flag changed, but behind the colonial façade lives and ownership remained largely the same.

The history of Latin America is filled with stories of revolt and warfare that share a similar fate. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Atlantic basin was the central theatre of rebellions and insurgencies. This so-called 'Age of Revolutions' marked the start of anticolonial, antislavery, and anti-establishment struggles of which the United States' independence from Britain in 1776, the Haitian Revolution on Saint Domingue in 1791, and the French Revolution of 1789 are the most well-known examples. Decades before, however, at least three resurrections – by the enslaved populations on St John in 1733, on Jamaica in 1760, and in Berbice (present-day Guyana) in 1763 – were already extremely effective and nearly became the first successful independence and abolitionist movements in Atlantic history. In Berbice, the revolutionaries controlled the colony for little more than a year, but their success tantalized the African-descended people with the prospect of liberation and autonomy. In no-time, songs that celebrated the Berbice uprising appeared in the repertoire of the enslaved population of the neighboring colony of Suriname. Plantation owners, fearing that one revolt might inspire another, tried to limit the circulation of news about successful uprisings, but inevitably stories and rumors circulated among the enslaved all across the Atlantic.

* C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch in Brazil, 1624-1654* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957).

The extraordinary rich sources for the Berbice uprising of 1763 reveal that, while thousands of enslaved people joined the rebellion, many were not purposeful rebels. Like the maroon society of Palmares, the revolutionaries of Berbice created a socially stratified society that combined African political customs with European and New-World institutions. The leaders knew very well that if they wanted to survive long-term, they would need to participate in the global economy with sugar from the plantations. They forced the enslaved that previously had worked the plantations for the Europeans to now cut the sugar cane for them. Moreover, the leaders' African traditions and cultural norms required people of their social position to be attended by servants and slaves. The Afro-Berbicians did not have a uniform vision of post-rebellion society.[*] It seemed that the only durable way out of slavery for most was to rely on subsistence farming and local barter trade, and to bid adieu to the global capitalist economy.

The successful wars for independence in Latin America at the beginning of the nineteenth century did not focus specifically on slavery, although many formerly enslaved people received manumission by fighting in patriot armies. The quest for meritocracy and democracy that had instigated the 'Atlantic revolutions' also found resonance amongst the bourgeois classes of Latin America, in particular the Spanish born in the Americas, then referred to as 'criollo', who seized this revolutionary moment to gain more independence from the colonial motherland. Similar to the demands of American revolutionaries, these wealthy men of property in Spanish America also sought to obtain governing power over their own local affairs, and demanded the same legal rights as the so-called Peninsulares (Spanish born in Spain). Most of these bourgeois revolutionaries were however less concerned with the rights and wellbeing of the lower classes, including slaves. Even the 'great liberator' Simon Bolivar mostly sought to establish an independent Gran-Columbia governed by a creole aristocracy rather than advocate for universal suffrage and a people's republic. Moreover, his decision to manumit the enslaved was born mostly out of fear of slave revolts like the one in Haiti, dreading that such a revolt would lead to the expulsion of all whites from Latin America. It would take more than half a century before slavery was abolished in all of independent Spanish-speaking America (in Cuba as late as 1886), and even longer in Lusophone Brazil (1888). The newly-established countries that were more dependent on slave-based cash crops to participate in the global economic system were to abolish slavery later than countries where slavery was not a primary source of labor. The Latin American independence movements were primarily bourgeois revolutions, that borrowed heavily from Enlightenment slogans and iconography of white revolutions, such as the French. The clearest example of this is probably the Phrygian cap or liberty cap

[*] Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: The New Press, 2020), pp. 75-94.

Image 5.8 A French army standard from 1793 displaying a Phrygian cap on all four corners

Image 5.9 The Argentinian Coat of Arms displaying the Phrygian cap in the center on top of a pole

that still has a prominent place in several Latin American countries' coat of arms. Going back thousands of years to the Roman Empire, the cap originated as an icon of freemen that was symbolically given to slaves upon manumission. It had been popularized during the French Revolution and came to represent liberty in general.

Ideas about slavery, abolition, political organization, economic systems, revolution, and freedom did not appear in isolation, but in dialogue between different places. As people moved between places they brought with them conceptions about order in the world, they borrowed ideas and images from other places, and they inspired others with their ideals.

Conclusion

Affordable consumption in a system of globalized production was only possible through unpaid labor. In order to compete in a global market with their goods, plantation owners used slave labor and environmentally damning production practices. As information about the hard realities of these production practices percolated through society and as the 'consumer class' emerged in Europe and North America in the early nineteenth century, buyers started to demand ethically sourced goods. This 'fair trade' movement contributed to the abolishment of slavery

Image 5.10 Blue glass sugar bowl from circa 1820-1830, inscribed in gilt: East India Sugar Not Made by Slaves

alongside a whole range of factors. This was not a consumer revolution to end capitalism, but a reformation campaign in which abolitionist consumers across the Atlantic World reimagined a global capitalism that would benefit everyone.* Just like ideas, objects, and people had spread throughout the Atlantic to support the system of slavery, ideas, objects, and people against slavery spread as well. These ideas and objects came together in a sugar bowl that can be seen in the image above.

Of course, slavery did not end with the abolishment of slavery in the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. Slavery still exists in the world and it is intimately connected to our everyday lives. The continued globalization of the world has made people, ideas, and goods more connected than ever before, and information is more readily available about the conditions on plantations. Fruit produced with slave labor on Latin American plantations can still be found in your local supermarket – either as juice or as fresh fruit. If there is a lesson to be learned from history in this regard, it is that ethical capitalism can contribute to a world where nobody has to live in slavery.

* Bronwen Everill, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

Guiding Questions

1. What is the Williams Thesis?
2. What is the issue with a lot of primary source material about slavery, and why is that a problem?
3. What did societies of maroons and revolutionary slaves have in common?
4. What are three examples of how Latin America was connected to the rest of the world in the period 1600-1800?
5. Is there ethical consumption in global capitalism, and why?

Guide to Further Reading

- Barcia, M., *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020). As the slave trade brought Europeans, Africans, and Americans into contact, diseases were traded along with human lives. Manuel Barcia examines the battle waged against disease, where traders fought against loss of profits while enslaved Africans fought for survival.
- Bethencourt, F., *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014). Demonstrating that there is not one continuous tradition of racism, Francisco Bethencourt shows that racism preceded any theories of race and must be viewed within the prism and context of social hierarchies and local conditions. He argues that in its various aspects, all racism has been triggered by political projects monopolizing specific economic and social resources.
- Cardoso, F.H., *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional: O negro na sociedade escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul* (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1962). Fernando Henrique Cardoso focuses on the state of Rio Grande do Sul to explore the relationship between slavery and capitalism in Brazil.
- Elliott, J.H., *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America. 1492-1830* (Yale University Press, 2020). John H. Elliott identifies and explains both the similarities and differences in the Spanish and the British empires' processes of colonization, the character of their colonial societies, their distinctive styles of imperial government, and the independence movements mounted against them.
- Eltis, D., *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). In this book David Eltis argues that the British led the way in ending the slave trade just when it was beginning to be important for the world economy, when there was a great need for labor around the world, and shows that Britain's control of the slave trade and great reliance on slave labor played a major role in its empire's rise to world economic dominance.

- Everill, B., *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020). Bronwen Everill illuminates the early years of global consumer society, while placing the politics of antislavery firmly in the history of capitalism. It is also a stark reminder that the struggle to ensure fair trade and labor conditions continues.
- Kars, M., *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: The New Press, 2020). Drawing on nine hundred interrogation transcripts, Marjoleine Kars tells the explosive story of a little-known revolution in Berbice, one that almost changed the face of the Americas. She has won multiple awards for this book.
- Metcalf, A.C., *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500-1600* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). Alida Metcalf argues that "go-betweens" – individuals who could bridge indigenous and European cultures – helped shape Brazilian society in the sixteenth century.
- Schwartz, S.B., *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992). This book provides insights on how the shifting power relationship between enslaved people and slaveholders reshaped the contours of Brazilian society. Stuart Schwartz demonstrates the complexity of the system by reconsidering work, resistance, kinship, and relations between enslaved persons and peasants.
- Smallwood, S., *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Stephanie Smallwood examines how the people at the center of her story – merchant capitalists, sailors, and slaves – made sense of the bloody process in which they were joined. The result is both a remarkable transatlantic view of the culture of enslavement, and a painful, intimate vision of the bloody, daily business of the slave trade.
- Williams, E., *Capitalism and Slavery – Third Edition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2021). Arguing that the slave trade was at the heart of Britain's economic progress, Eric Williams's landmark 1944 study revealed the connections between capitalism and racism, and has influenced generations of historians ever since.

CHAPTER 6.

Religion: Perspective and Practice

JOCHEM VAN DEN BOOGERT

Introduction

Over the last two decades, especially since the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, a global rise in religious violence appears undeniable. From Islamophobia in North America to Hindu-Nationalism in India, from the persecution of Yazidis in the Middle East to militant Buddhist monks in mainland Southeast Asia: across the globe, religious intolerance dominates social and political agendas.* For a long time the stereotypical image of the peaceful and tranquil Buddhist was very powerful. A case in point is the peaceful resistance of Aung San Suu Kyi against the military government in Myanmar, which won her a Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Her participation in Burmese politics was widely regarded as a crucial step towards a full-fledged democracy and fueled hopes for an end to half a century of military rule in the country. However, since 2016 military-dominated factions of the Burmese government organized, together with extremist Buddhist monks, a violent persecution and expulsion of the Rohingya, an Islamic minority living near the border with Bangladesh. Failing to condemn these actions, the international community called upon Aung San Suu Kyi to return her Nobel prize.

Image 6.1 Aung San Suu Kyi

* The Clash of Civilizations thesis which informs some of this thinking will be discussed in chapter 12.

The image of the peaceful Buddhist has been tarnished. This chapter dives into the discussion about the role religion plays and has played in defining and understanding non-Western cultures. It investigates, with a specific focus on Buddhism and Myanmar, how one culture (the West) came to understand another (the East) in terms of religious beliefs and practices. The main argument of this chapter is that the lens we use to study phenomena is important for what we see. This applies here, in particular, to the study of religion in its historical context.

The matter of defining religion is well known for being a theoretical minefield. This is easily illustrated by reflecting on a typical definition of religion, such as the one from the 1991 edition of Webster's dictionary of the English language: "Man's [humankind's] expression of his [its] acknowledgment of the divine: a system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred and uniting its adherents in a community". A couple of things should strike us in this definition. Firstly, religion is said to be something that is inherent to humankind. In other words, humans have the capacity to religion, and all over the world different people have their religion. Secondly, religion is focused on the divine, this could be one god, or multiple gods, or a supernatural power. Thirdly, religion revolves around a particular set of beliefs and practices related to the sacred or the divine. Lastly, although the capacity to religion is located in the individual, religion is something that pertains to a community. This means that when we speak of a religion, we often mean a group of people that adhere to the same religious beliefs and practice the same religious rites and traditions. The same dictionary entry continues by identifying a number of major religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism.

This is where problems start: when we compare, for example, Islam and Buddhism, the former perfectly fits the category as defined above, the latter does not. Muslims, despite great internal variety within Islam, do share a number of religious beliefs, such as faith in Allah as the one and only God, the omnipotent creator of the universe. Being a Muslim implies one subjects oneself to the will of Allah, as it was revealed to Mohammed, the last Prophet, and has been recorded in the Qur'an. Buddhism, however, in none of its variations, knows such a divinity or god. The Buddha is not divine, he is neither a god nor a prophet, but a mere human who found a way (not *the* way) to Nirvana, i.e. the cessation of human suffering. Moreover, his teachings are not a divine revelation, but a set of practical instructions on how to achieve that enlightened state. The Tripitaka (the Buddhist canon) does not record a divine revelation, but lists the rules and prohibitions of monastic life, the teaching of the Buddha, and the analysis and interpretation thereof.

In short, although Islam and Buddhism are both categorized as religions, they appear to be fundamentally different. This incongruity has, of course, not escaped scholars of religion and many have attempted to explain and rectify these and similar dissonances in their respective theories. Not only did this lead to a rampant growth in the number of definitions of religion – especially in the latter half of the twentieth century – but there also seems to be no consensus on which to employ. Since the jury is still out on the issue, one should not expect us to solve the issue here.

Most historical, archeological, and anthropological scholarship considers religion to be a constituent component of the societies and cultures that populate our world. For example, the historical emergence of civilizations, i.e. complex societies, was for a long time thought to have been accompanied by an increasing complexity in religious thought and practice.[*] Whether or not, and to what extent, religion facilitated the rise of complex, urbanized and hierarchical societies is a matter of scholarly debate. The dominant theory in both History and Archeology has long been that a more organized, ritualized and monumentalized form of spiritualism or religion, as opposed to a more intangible, individual, family or clan based spiritual experience, became dominant throughout the world with the first Agrarian or Neolithic Revolution (ca. 10.000-8000 BCE). This revolution entailed that humankind shifted from being (semi-)nomadic, following wild game and/or seasonal ripening in order to gather their food supplies, to becoming settled and dependent on planned food production (agriculture). As a result, societies became more stratified: the food resources which were firstly produced also had to be stored and thus guarded, leading to the diversification of tasks within a community. The increase in diversification of tasks was thought to have sparked a continuously more hierarchical organization of societies in which those who guard and protect were ranked higher than those who produce. For instance, those who became tasked with seeking and 'guarding' the blessings of god, the blessing of a good harvest, were seen to be even more important in early societies. However, recent archeological evidence has been taken to indicate that religion, as a monumental and complex organized communal expression of spirituality, probably predates the Neolithic revolution. Scholars think that certain prehistoric sites of devotion coalesced with sites of seasonal markets. For example, in Bronze Age South East Asia, great ceremonial drums cast in bronze (Image 6.2), which scholars believe have played an important role in religious ceremonies, were unearthed in places where seasonal markets and gatherings are known to have been held.[**] On that basis it has been speculated that such rituals served the purpose of celebrating successful harvests or mercantile exchanges. Moreover, scholars hypothesize that such rituals helped to cement bonds between non-familial communities, who perhaps met only once a year. Contemporary scholarship thus argues that, from the earliest times, religious

* J.R. McNeill and H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of Human History* (London: Norton, 2003); Harvey Whitehouse et al., "Complex Societies precede Moralizing Gods throughout World History," *Nature* Vol. 595, No. 320 (2021). Available at: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03656-3 Last accessed 15 April 2022.

** Charles F.W. Higham, 'Ritual and Religion in South-East Asia', in: Timothy Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 470-481.

practices have helped societies that were scattered over great distances to retain a sense of belonging and communality.

Image 6.2 Dong Son Type 1 Bronze Drum, 300 to 200 BCE, Vietnam

Another notable departure point for the discussion of the origins of religion is the idea of the Axial Age, a period from 800 till 200 BCE that is believed to have seen the emergence of more universally oriented religious and philosophical thought. It is argued by scholars such as Karl Jaspers and more recently by Karen Armstrong that world religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism came about during this period, as did the Greek philosophy of amongst others Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. These world religions and philosophies are believed to distinguish themselves from earlier forms of religion by the universality of their message. Although religions without such a universal message or outlook had already been widely spread, they did not cut across different societies. This then is what is thought to differentiate the philosophies and religions of the Axial Age: the capacity to extend a universal and unifying message across different societies and spheres of political influence. The new world religions with their universal message could find practitioners of faith in vast areas which did not have a political unity.

Religious studies is the academic discipline that aims to study religious beliefs, practices, and institutions from a non-theological perspective. This means that it wishes to study religion, without taking up a particular religious viewpoint. It relies on methodologies and insights from philology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, etc. It has roots in late nineteenth century scholarships, such as that of the famous Indologist Max Müller, whose 1873 *Introduction to the Science of Religion* is considered a foundational work. The discipline rose to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. Works such as Mirca Eliade's *A History of Religious Ideas* and Ninian Smart's *World Religions: A Dialogue* are typical of this period.*

Religious studies distinguishes between world religions and local religions. A world religion refers to a large and internationally widespread religion. Typically, the term is used for Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These "world religions" are regarded as different entities of similar stature. Publications such as Karl Jaspers's *The Origin and Goal of History* rely heavily on this idea.** The concept of world religion is commonly contrasted with that of local religion, which denotes religious beliefs and practices that are deemed unique to a specific region and community. As such, they do not transcend social or national boundaries. Although the categories of world and local religion are commonly accepted in religious studies, the task of explaining what religion is – and also of defining it – is usually avoided.

Each of the five world religions can be found in the South and Southeast Asian region. For example, India is home to, amongst others, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism; the main religion in the Philippines is Catholicism; the principal religion in Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesia is Islam; Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao and Cambodia practice Buddhism. Add to this the myriad of local religious traditions and the virtually endless array of cross-pollinations, and it is easy to understand the region's reputation for harboring an immense religious variety. However, things have not always been that straightforward. In fact, it has taken centuries of investigation to identify and label this region's traditions in terms of religion, to frame their central religious tenets, and to link them to ethnic, social, or national groups. This chapter is restricted to just one piece of this puzzle: Buddhism in Burma and its Western roots.

As our contemporary world at large, and the region of South and Southeast Asia in particular, is reportedly seeing more than its share of religious intolerance and identity politics based on religious norms and values, it pays off to have a basic understanding of the historical process by which the religions in this region came to be identified, imagined, and even constructed.

* Mirca Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, 3 vols.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976-1986); Ninian Smart, *World Religions: A Dialogue* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1960).

** Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zürich: Artemis, 1949).

Historiography: World Religion: Buddhism

Virtually since its inception, the scholarship on Buddhism has faced a conundrum: is it a religion or not? Consider, for example, the following statement of S.N. Goenka (1924-2013), an immensely influential Buddhist teacher: "The Buddha taught practical Dhamma, the actual way to live a wholesome life. And Vipassana is the practical know-how to lead a life of real happiness."* Goenka considers Vipassana, a meditation technique, to be at the heart of the Buddha's teachings. Furthermore, neither Vipassana nor the Buddha's teachings are religion to him. However, if Buddhism is not a religion, then what is it? A philosophy? A way of life? These and associated questions have been endemic to the study of Buddhism. From the broader perspective of Religious Studies, a discipline that came to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century, such questions have been related to the issue of defining religion.

In order to decide which phenomena do or do not belong to the category of religion, we need to know what its essential characteristics are: a sacred scripture, a community of believers, a prophet, belief in god(s)? If we define a religion as a system of beliefs that revolves around a revelation which concerns an omnipotent god, then Christianity, Islam and Judaism fall into that category.

6.a Concept Definition

Religion

A set of beliefs inherent to humankind focused on the divine which inform a set of practices which are carried out individually as well as communally.

Consequently, if Buddhism is a tradition of practical teachings that does not rely on any such revelation and is basically atheistic, is it then still a religion? Is there a way to define religion that allows for categorizing both Christianity and Buddhism as such? Questions such as these have occupied scholars of Religious Studies since the 1950s. Today, however, most religious scholars appear to agree that defining religion is a futile, if not impossible, task. Hence, they prefer to avoid these gnarly questions. Nevertheless, the issue is hardly settled and every now and then it is brought up again.

This perplexing state of affairs is related to the historiography of Buddhism: how, when, and by whom the history of Buddhism as a religion came to be written has everything to do with the ambiguity of its status as a religion. In particular, the conceptual framework within which this was executed plays a significant role. By

* FAQs on Vipassana Meditation. Questions and answers with Mr. S.N. Goenka, https://www.vridhamma.org/Questions-and-Answers-About-the-Technique-of-Vipassana-Meditation. Last consulted 15 April 2022.

means of illustration, consider the following facts. The origins of Hinduism – which is considered the religion of which Buddhism is an offshoot – are usually traced back to roughly 1750 BCE, sometimes even to 3500 BCE. Buddhism is thought to have been founded in the sixth century BCE. However, the term 'Hinduism' was coined as late as 1787 CE.[*] Similarly, the term 'Buddhism' was first used in print in 1817.[**] Before that time, the myriad traditions these terms refer to were labelled heathenism, paganism, superstition or idolatry. One can find such descriptions in the travel accounts of the numerous Western travelers to Asia from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. These terms of description were part of a Western, Christian vocabulary and indicate what they regarded as primitive religions, false beliefs, and the worship of false gods respectively. A case in point could be Marco Polo's travel account. Although experts disagree on whether or not his discussion of the city of Mien concerns Pegu, a port city in Myanmar, we can at least discern the way he speaks about their religion, viz. he calls the inhabitants idolaters.[***] Interestingly, there were no indigenous counterparts for the terms "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" and associated concepts in Sanskrit or Pali, the languages of the 'sacred' Hindu and Buddhist texts. These terms were actually introduced into Asian languages by Western scholars and missionaries. It certainly is telling that there was no Burmese equivalent for either the term and concept of religion or for the term and concept of Buddhism. Both were coined by the missionary Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) in the 1820s.[****] The identification and study of Buddhism as a religion also entailed writing its history – who its founder was, when he lived, how this religion spread, etc. This historiography is to be credited first to eighteenth century missionaries and then to nineteenth century scholars. Hence, the concept of Buddhism as a religion, its history, and the study of both have demonstrable geographical and conceptual roots in Western scholarship. Finally, through (colonial) education and missionary activities, these ideas found their way into the minds of the actual Burmese 'Buddhists'. In short, the conceptualization of Buddhism and its continuous study represent not just how people, but also how ideas, travel.

The scientific study of Buddhism was initiated with the discovery, translation, and analysis of Sanskrit and Pali scriptures by mostly British and German philologists in the course of the nineteenth century. However, Western travelers and missionaries had already for centuries been describing the beliefs and practices of what they thought were the indigenous religions of South and Southeast Asia.

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[*] Geoffrey A. Oddie, 'Hindu Religious Identity with Special Reference to the Origin and Significance of the Term "Hinduism" c. 1787-1947', in: Esther Bloch and Marianne Keppens (eds) *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 45.

[**] Michel Jean François Ozeray and Urs App, *First Western Book on Buddhism and Buddha: Ozeray's Recherches sur Buddou of 1817* (Paris: University Media, 2017).

[***] Hugh Murray, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Harper: New York, 1845), p. 147.

[****] Gustaaf Houtman, 'How a Foreigner Invented "Buddhendom" in Burmese: From Tha-tha-na to Bok-da'Ba-tha, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Oxford* 'Vol. 21, No. 2 (1990), pp. 113-128.

Especially the missionaries, such as the Jesuits, a Catholic missionary order founded in the sixteenth century, were instrumental in tracing back numerous local traditions to one original teacher, Gautama Buddha, thereby aiding in the conceptualization of a single religion that had spread over the entire region. Their missionary zeal encouraged them to study the languages, histories, customs, and what they held to be the religious views of the many different societies of Asia. One such missionary was Francis Xavier, a founding member of the Jesuit order, who preached in India and China. These Jesuits were ethnographers *avant la lettre*, and their descriptions were based upon the same familiar categories as discussed above. In the course of the seventeenth century, Jesuits would speak of a *doctrina orientalis* (oriental belief system) that was supposedly present across Asia and revolved around certain essential doctrines, such as the belief in reincarnation.[*] Parts of this allegedly pan-Asian religion correspond to what we now recognize as Buddhism. This phase was thus conducive to conceiving of a religion that had spread over a large geographical area and had in the process differentiated into separate, yet related, religious traditions. This entity became known as Buddhism only as late as the early nineteenth century. Subsequently, in the course of the latter half of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century, Western philologists provided it with a textual foundation through the translation of Sanskrit and Pali texts. Once this entity was established as a scholarly object, archeology and anthropology added detail and nuance.

Knowledge is power, and this is certainly the case for colonial rule in South and Southeast Asia. In order to better govern their colonies, subsequent colonial governments needed administrators familiar with the customs, laws, and languages of the peoples inhabiting their 'possessions'. To this end, these men (they were all men) received an education in assigned colleges, tailored to their future tasks in the colonies. These administrators-to-be would be trained in administration and accounting, agricultural sciences, civil engineering, and/or the colonial judiciary system – the skills necessary to develop and manage a profitable colony. They would also receive an education in the cultures of the colonies: the 'character', customs, languages, and so on, of the peoples living there. Strikingly, at the heart of this endeavor to understand the cultures of South and Southeast Asia lies the question of religion.

What concepts and theories were available to them to make sense of the cultures they encountered? A very limited amount of literature on the region was available in the late fifteenth, early sixteenth century. There were some fragments dating back to Antiquity, some rare travel accounts, but mostly there was the Bible, which provided an account both of the history of the world and of the peoples inhabiting it. The importance of this source cannot be overstated, as at least up until the end

[*] Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 4-5.

Image 6.3 André Reinoso. Francis Xavier Preaching in Goa (India), 1619-1622

of the nineteenth century most elements of the Biblical account of the origin and spread of humankind were taken literally. After all, Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published only in 1859, *The Descent of Man* in 1871, and it took decades for his ideas to become generally accepted. Thus, for centuries on end it was taken for a fact that the Earth had been repopulated after the Deluge by Noah's sons – Shem, Ham, Japheth – and their wives.* Consequently, it was also taken to be true that Noah's offspring had spread the original religion, i.e. Christianity, to all corners of the world, and that over time, due to the machinations of the devil and his minions, most of the peoples inhabiting the Earth had strayed from the true religion. This implies that to the Western travelers at the dawn of the *Age of Discovery* it was unfathomable that the peoples they were to meet at the other end of the world would be deprived of religion.

6.b Concept Definition

Age of Discovery

The period in history from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century when the European seafaring powers commanded the sea and 'discovered' other parts of the globe.

* The Deluge is the worldwide flood by which, according to the Bible, God purged the Earth of the corruption and wickedness humankind had fallen into. Only Noah, his family, and the animals on his ark were spared from God's wrath.

This conceptual framework was to a very large degree explicitly theologically Christian in nature. Within this Christian theological framework, people would be either Christian, i.e. adherents to the one true faith; Jewish, i.e. those who (erroneously) had not accepted Christ as the Messiah; Muslim, i.e. those who (erroneously) had accepted Mohammed as the last prophet; or Heathen, those who (erroneously) worshipped something or someone other than the god of Israel. In short, the conceptual apparatus with which to make sense of those cultures so radically different from their own would have been extremely limited. However, it is important to identify the one element that is crucial to the story at hand: the assumption that religion is a cultural universal given.

Historiography: Local Religion: Burmese Buddhism

The universality of religion – or rather the assumption of it – underlies and helps to structure the Western observations, descriptions and understanding of the cultures of South and Southeast Asia. For one thing, since each culture is thought to be home to its religion(s), cultures can be distinguished accordingly. A case in point is Myanmar which is said to sport its own kind of Buddhism, a combination of Buddhism and local beliefs and customs.* However, such an understanding of Burmese culture emerged only over the course of an extended period of time, the process of which will be illustrated through the following punctuated overview. We can distinguish four stages.

In the first stage, in a period before we can speak of Western colonization, we find the very first identification of a religious entity. With only a very modest frame of reference and virtually no accounts of Burma available, the groundwork for the conceptualization of Burmese Buddhism is carried out in this period. These early descriptions reflect the above sketched Biblical expectations, as they speak of the Burmese as heathens, idolaters and devil worshippers.

During the second phase, knowledge about the 'religion' of the Burmese increased. Interestingly, these findings, drawn from observations of practices and from conversations with locals, were still mapped on the conceptual mold most familiar to them, that of Christianity. The main point of convergence: as it is assumed that the Burmese adhere to a false religion – Christianity being the true one – the focus of the investigation is on the (false) god and the (false) beliefs the Burmese adhere to.

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* Myanmar and Burma mean the same thing and both terms are in use in the country itself. The first is more literary, the second is more colloquial. In 1989, after the authoritarian rule of Ne Win, the then new military government decided to name the country Myanmar instead of Burma, indicating a break with the colonial past. Today however, using the term Myanmar is sometimes taken as an implicit recognition of the military rule, which has become discredited.

It is only during the third stage, with the scholarly study of it, that the term Buddhism appears. The first time it does so in print would be in Michel Ozeray's 1817 *Recherches sur Buddou ou Boudou, Instituteur Religieux de l'Asie Orientale*. This work is one of the first to provide a systematic account of what was known about Buddhism to that day. It relies on an extensive number of primary and secondary sources, amongst which are reports from Western scholars, merchants, missionaries and diplomats. As such it is more a compendium of received knowledge than an original work. Buddhism is presented as a religion with a core set of beliefs, a shared body of practices, and a community of believers (both monks and lay people). As before, Buddhism is described along the lines of Christianity, even up to the point of discussing heresies within Buddhism.

A subsequent boost to the scholarship of Buddhism came from the 'discovery', translation, and analysis of Buddhist texts, which took off in earnest after 1837 when Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) received a series of Sanskrit manuscripts that Brian Hodgson (1800-1894) had collected in Nepal. Based upon these texts, Burnouf wrote *Introduction à l'Histoire du Buddhisme Indien* (1844) and from it he published *Le Lotus de la bonne Loi* (1852), a translation of a key Buddhist text, the Lotus Sutra. Thus, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Buddhism came to be studied from a textual perspective: based upon Sanskrit and Pali sources, the already well-known themes of historical founder, ethics, theology/doctrine, and monasticism are further developed. That is to say, these already familiar themes are provided with a textual foundation. Notably, the previously explicitly Biblical framework gradually receded into the background: there is less talk of devil's worship, idolatry, and superstition. Certain scholars even admired Buddha and Buddhism. However, this did not mean that the old Christian mold was no longer in effect. The mentioned focal points were still present and an additional Christian theme was added: Buddhism was now conceived of as a reformation of Hinduism, along the lines of the Protestant Reformation vs. Catholicism. Buddha thus becomes to Hinduism what Martin Luther was to Catholicism.[*]

Additionally, the historical connections between the 'Buddhisms' of the different Asian regions now became consolidated on a scriptural basis. Based upon lineages of text, by which scriptures can be traced back to their supposed original, the historical spread of Buddhism from somewhere in India, over Southeast Asia, all the way to East Asia was reconstructed. As a result, Buddhism received the status of a world religion, i.e. it became recognized as one of the five largest and most widespread religions on the globe. Its status as a world religion distinguishes it from, on the one hand, other world religions and, on the other, from local religions.[**]

* Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 70-74.

** Tomoku Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions. Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 262-263.

A final phase sees a move away from this large and all-encompassing category of Buddhism, towards the idea of different, local 'Buddhisms'. From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, especially as a result of anthropological fieldwork, scholars started to focus on what they considered local religious practices, rather than on textual standards. In their efforts to make sense of the culture of the Burmese, scholars noted that few Burmese were strict Buddhists. Firstly, they were not that orthodox, i.e. their practices and beliefs were not always vindicated by Buddhist scriptures. Secondly, the Burmese were also engaged in many other practices, such as Weikza cults and Nat worship, both of which could be considered to be at odds with Buddhism. The former indicates alchemist practices and cults revolving around wizards who, among other things, strive for immortality. The latter refers to the rituals and traditions surrounding Nats, powerful spirits who need to be propitiated on a regular basis in order to avert misfortune or to obtain certain material goods or success.

Image 6.4 Shwedagon Pagoda

The Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon (Myanmar) offers an illustration of this blending of different traditions. Although Shwedagon is a Buddhist pagoda, many of its constitutive parts have little to do with Buddhism. Firstly, there is the practice of Hindu astrology. Within Shwedagon there are 8 planetary posts which correspond to the days of the week (Wednesday is split in two). People visit the planetary post that corresponds with the day they were born. Each post is marked by an animal representing that day, a guardian spirit or Nat, and a Buddha image. Here, people offer flowers and flags, and pour water on the image, while pronouncing a recitation. This ritual, which blends these different traditions, is called the Blessing Ritual.

Architecturally speaking as well, the Shwedagon pagoda contains elements that can be traced back to different traditions. There is a Banyan tree, descended from the Mahabodhi Temple in India, the place where Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment. Besides shrines devoted to the Buddha and famous monks, there are shrines devoted to Nats, god-like spirits that need to be appeased by means of offerings and paying respect. Additionally, there are shrines devoted to Weikza, a kind of wizard or alchemist who is believed to have obtained eternal life. All of these receive special attention by the visitors to the temple.

Burmese Buddhism as a local religion

The combination of such divergent elements, as exemplified in the different shrines of the Shwedagon pagoda and in practices such as the Blessing Ritual, have presented scholars with a puzzle. If the Burmese are Buddhists, then how do we explain this simultaneous adherence to other practices, many of which are at odds with Buddhism: e.g. the Weikza's striving for immortality does not fit well with the Buddhist goal of nirvana, i.e. ending the cycle of rebirth, a cessation of life. Similarly, placating Nats out of fear or desire is at odds with the Buddhist ideal of equanimity. Currently, there are two main solutions to this problem. The first is to think of the Burmese Buddhist as adhering to two or more religious systems: besides adherence to a Buddhist religion, the Burmese Buddhist also practices alternative religions, such as Nat worship. A second solution, currently more popular, is to think of the

Image 6.5 Guardian of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, Burma

Image 6.6 Shwedagon Ritual (1)

Image 6.7 Shwedagon Ritual (2)

Burmese as adherents to a local religion, called Burmese Buddhism. This Burmese Buddhism is regarded as a combination of Buddhism, Nat worship, and Weikza cults. It is then argued that Buddhism encompasses the practices and beliefs of the other 'religious' systems, i.e. they have been 'Buddhified'. Both solutions lead to new conundrums, such as: How committed to Buddhism are the Burmese really? Or, how does one explain that the Burmese are not perturbed by the above-mentioned apparent contradictions?

In the conceptualization of the local religion called Burmese Buddhism, it is claimed that this is the way Buddhism is expressed locally, in Burma. The underlying argument is that when Buddhism arrived in Burma, it did not remain unaltered, but somehow absorbed local practices and beliefs. Consequently, it came to diverge from orthodox Buddhism as sanctified by the canonical scriptures. It is important to point out how this idea of a local Buddhism is still embedded in the same old conceptual framework. Firstly, the practices the Burmese are engaged in are thought to be expressions of certain (religious) beliefs. Secondly, there is a tendency to think of Weikza cults and Nat worship in terms of religion and belief. This too is not self-evident. Thirdly, the 'beliefs' of the Burmese are compared with what is considered Buddhist beliefs. Consequently, it is established that some of the Burmese and Buddhist 'beliefs' and their concomitant practices are at odds with each other. Or, alternatively, it is argued that certain beliefs and practices have been brought in line with Buddhist beliefs.

6.c Concept Definition

Religious Syncretism

A combination of different, usually opposing, religious beliefs and practices.

In the domain of Religious Studies, the term syncretism means the combination of different religious beliefs and practices. In that sense all religions are syncretist. For instance, wherever Christianity settled, it absorbed local practices and beliefs. This is why e.g. Catholicism in Belgium is different from that in Mexico or the Philippines. The same can be said about Islam in Tunisia and in Indonesia. In these cases it is more accurate to speak of religious assimilation, or acculturation. A more precise understanding of syncretism holds that it is the combination of religious beliefs and practices that actually cannot go together. For example, in the case of Burmese Buddhism it is argued that the belief in nirvana, which is to be attained through the cessation of all desire, is in contradiction with the religious practice of making offerings to Nats for the purpose of obtaining something, which is a condonation of desire. Suggesting that the Burmese adhere to such contradictory beliefs falls under the banner of syncretism. Both in its broad and narrow understanding, syncretism carries the connotation of heterodoxy; it is not in line with sacred scripture. For this reason, syncretism is more often associated with local religions, and as such, religious studies recognize syncretism all over the world. For instance, in the eighteenth century many Wampanoag – a Native American tribe – were reported to blend elements of Reformed Protestantism, such as pastoral care, a providential worldview, and elements of Protestant ethics with their native traditions, such as fasting, dream interpretation, and shamanism.* The Sukuma of

* Julius H. Rubin, *Tears of Repentance: Christian Indian Identity and Community in Colonial Southern New England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

West-Central Tanzania are said to practice a syncretist mixture of African religion – mostly ancestral worship and witchcraft – and Christian tradition.* As discussed in chapter five, Brazil knows of Cadomblé, which is understood to be a syncretist blend of Roman Catholicism and West-African traditions that came about amidst the Atlantic slave trade.

The Burmese Reception of "Buddhism"

If Buddhism as a religion is the way the West has made sense of certain traditions in South and Southeast Asia and if we have good reasons to doubt the veracity and accuracy of such an understanding, then an obvious question follows: If Buddhism is not a religion, then what is it? Here too there are no easy answers. However, the reception of the concept of "Buddhism" in Burma might provide us the beginnings of an answer. In order to translate the Western term Buddhism into Burmese, and in the absence of a conceptual counterpart in that language, the Burmese neologism *botdabada* was coined. This feat has been credited to the American Baptist missionary Judson, who preached in Burma from the 1810s to 1840s.** *Botdabada* is a combination of *botda*, the Pali term for Buddha, and *bada*, the Pali term for language and text. It is thus not featured in Buddhist scriptures. Over time, however, the word came to be adopted by the Burmese themselves, but it appears that they use it to refer to something different from what Western missionaries and scholars had in mind. For the Burmese, *botdabada* is more closely associated with culture rather than with religion. This is to say, *botdabada* is about certain traditional practices that one has learned from parents and grandparents, such as: organizing the ceremonies accompanying the ordination of boys, practicing charity, taking the precepts (abstaining from taking life, abstaining from taking what is not given, abstaining from sensuous misconduct, abstaining from false speech, abstaining from intoxicants) on specific holidays, listening to teachings of monks, visiting monasteries and pagodas, paying respect to monks, etc.*** In short, the term *bodtabada* is understood in terms of traditions, i.e. as sets of practices handed down over generations, and not in terms of (religious) beliefs.

* Frans Wijsen, 'Popular Christianity in East Africa: inculturation or syncretism?', *Exchange* Vol. 29, No.1 (2000), pp. 37-60.

** Houtman, 'How a Foreigner Invented "Buddhendom" in Burmese', p. 115-117.

*** Ibidem, p. 117-119.

Conclusion

This historical overview has shed light on the process that led to the conceptualization of Buddhism as a world religion and of Burmese Buddhism as a local religion. Attention has been drawn to the conceptual framework within which this has been carried out. A fundamental aspect in this framework is the universality of religion, which has compelled Western observers and scholars alike to see and describe religions where in actuality there might be none. The conceptualization and study of Burmese religion was initiated in the early modern period by Western visitors to the region – merchants, sailors, military men, missionaries, civil servants. Because of their shared conceptual framework, which has demonstrable Christian theological roots, they took religion to be culturally universal, and were compelled to see religion even in those cultures where the actual concept of it was absent. Consequently, over the course of several centuries, various traditions or aspects thereof, came to be described as religions. A case in point is Buddhism, which received the status of world religion in the course of the twentieth century. As scholarship shifted its focus to local religions, the idea of a Burmese Buddhism emerged. The assumption of the universality of religion in particular raises doubts as to the accuracy of such accounts about religion in South and Southeast Asia. We can recognize similar scholarly patterns in the study of other non-Western societies and cultures.

Guiding questions

1. What is a world religion and why is Buddhism considered one?
2. What is a local religion and why is Burmese Buddhism considered one?
3. What does it mean for religion to be culturally universal and what is the origin of this assumption?
4. What did the discovery, translation and analysis of Buddhism's sacred texts add to what was already known about this 'religion'?

Guide to Further Reading

- Balagangadhara, S. N., *'The Heathen in His Blindness...' Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005). A thorough analysis of the conceptualization of Asian religion – in particular that of Hinduism – complemented with a theoretical framework for studying religion and culture.
- Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte, *Champions of Buddhism: Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014). An excellent example of how Burmese Buddhism is currently being conceptualized and studied as a local religion.
- Houtman, Gustaaf, 'How a Foreigner Invented "Buddhendom" in Burmese: From Tha-tha-na to Bok-da'Ba-tha', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Oxford* Vol. 21, No. 2 (1990), pp. 113-128. One of the very few accounts that investigates the Burmese reception of the concept of Buddhism.
- Leopold, Anita, and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004). A discussion of syncretism from several scholarly perspectives.
- Masuzawa, Tomoku. *The Invention of World Religions. Or, How European Universalism was preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). A major contribution to the critical approach towards the idea and study of world religions.
- Roover, Jakob De., 'Incurably Religious? Consensus Gentium and the Cultural Universality of Religion.' *Numen* Vol. 61, No. 1 (2014), pp. 5-32. A concise overview of how the assumption of the universality of religion underlies the study of non-Western cultures.