Europeans Abroad, 1400-1700: 
Strangers in Not-so-Strange Lands

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This paper is by way of an introduction to a large essay is about the growing presence of Europeans around the world in the three centuries after 1400 CE. In large part is the result of years of immersion in (and reaction to) European historiography about European Expansion. The reader should therefore be aware that, given the scope of the project, some its challenges to vintage bits of Eurocentrism will sound to specialists in other fields like repetitions of the obvious. This danger is, I hope, offset by the possibility of reducing the one-sidedness of the way in which Western historians have tended to look at European expansion.¹

Between 1400 and 1700 thousands of Europeans took up residence all over the world – a process that prompts a series of rhetorical questions. Once the European galleons had disappeared over the horizon, and the tiny garrisons of European soldiers were dead from tropical disease, what made it possible for the presence of Europeans to become a normal feature in many African, American, and Asian societies? What was the interaction between Native Americans and Europeans in Anglo-French North America? What support networks and resources could Europeans draw upon when left without military and diplomatic backing? How were those resources organized? What kept the Spanish-American Empire functioning with only modest and poorly organized local militias? More basic to the topic, what was a “European”?²

Forty years ago the phrase ‘European expansion’ evoked a pretty well defined narrative. In that older version, by 1500 CE the Spanish and Portuguese

¹ The persistence of these habits is illustrated by the recent Glennn J. Ames, Vasco da Gama: Renaissance Crusader(New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), a short volume designed for classroom use.
were pushing into the Atlantic in search of a route to the East and that would give them access to Asian luxuries and eliminate Italian and Middle Eastern middlemen. The Spaniards seized control of what they considered the most valuable parts of America, took away a great deal of silver, caused the death of most of the Indians, and filled much of the void with African slaves. Similar narratives have the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, English, and Spanish (who got there by way of the Acapulco-Manila back door), opening ocean routes to India and China, sending out armed fleets, and building impressive maritime empires. This version of European Expansion marginalized the Mediterranean and the Middle East and was presented as reinforcing the march of Northwestern Europe toward capitalism, imperialism, and the industrial revolution. It also presented Africa, Asia, and America as the ineffectual hosts of the technologically and economically more advanced Europeans.

Conventional accounts of “European Expansion” also carried an implicit assumption that the story of Europeans in America was very different from that of Europeans in Asia. The process of interaction in the Americas clearly was different in at least four ways: (1) For one thing, American polities were usually quite small. With the exception of the two great empires in Mexico and the Andes, politics was generally focused at the level of tribal city-states or within loose-jointed alliances of clans. Thus much of North America was organized in ways that resembled the clan-based world of the West African coast. (2) For another, as European contacts multiplied, Native American society had to cope with the massive impact of European disease. The devastation caused by massive population loss meant that as contacts multiplied, American societies were coping with on-going problems of social and political reintegration. (3) In Mexico and Peru the Spaniards were able to replace the indigenous empires with their own far-ranging political system, but were vastly outnumbered by their Indian subjects. (4) Finally, unlike their activities in coastal Africa and Asia, Europeans in America quickly focused on colonization and permanent occupation. This gave their relations with local society an additional ongoing source of conflict.
Despite these major differences, many aspects of European relations with America followed the same patterns seen elsewhere. Most European incursions took place on a very small scale. After all, Cortes’ army, perhaps the biggest in the conquest process, included at most 700 Spaniards, while most early expeditions and colonization projects were much smaller. It can hardly surprise us to realize that their imperial regime was vitally dependent on cooperation and collaboration. Moreover, from the deck of the Mayflower or the little stockade at Jamestown, local American polities, however small they may have been on some global scale, presented formidable threats that created an incentive for peaceful, if guarded, trade and diplomacy that was not that different from European relations in Afro-Asian port cities.

We now know that the new, self-proclaimed European empires were fragile and, to non-Europeans, less imposing than they are in European history textbooks. This essay looks behind older euro-centric expansion narratives in search of the support systems and assumptions that Europeans abroad drew upon when left without support from home. What emerges is pragmatism and adaptability on the part of Europeans, openness and curiosity on the part of other societies, and the problematic nature of the concept of “European.”

This way of addressing European expansion has been prompted by the rapid growth of World History as an autonomous field. World History is often regarded with skepticism by specialists in more conventional historical fields, but it remains that human societies have been interacting over long distances for a very long time and that those interactions had consequences. Moreover, the tempo of those exchanges began to accelerate in the fourteenth century.

In writing about European expansion prior to 1700 Western historians have too often treated it as an early phase of the hegemonic Imperialism of Europe that marked the nineteenth century. This version highlights the institutions created by the European states involved -- the Spanish Empire, the Portuguese *Estado da India* and the Dutch and English East India Companies.2

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Europeans are characterized as aggressive, prone to use military force, intent on forcing Christianity upon others, and intolerant of infidels, heretics, and idolaters. While this account told us what was important to people back in Europe, it said little about the actual impact of the European presence and even less about how individual Europeans interacted with the people they met.

Since these contacts are often marginal to histories written as national narratives, we need to move past the habit of constructing explanations in terms of nation-states or administratively defined countries. Once we have reframed what actually took place, we can evaluate its significance from a different perspective.

For most Western historians, this involves a good deal of baggage. Both the issue of European exceptionalism (after all, Europe produced the first Industrial Revolution), and the habit of projecting the imperialism of the nineteenth-century back into earlier centuries have colored the story of Europe’s entry into the larger world. These assumptions crystallized in the course of the nineteenth century -- as late as the Napoleonic period many Europeans regarded Islamic societies as bigger, stronger, and richer than their own. Similarly, we see orientalist assumptions behind accounts in which whole countries seem not to have existed until seen by Europeans. As late as 1990 one popular World Civilization text actually talked about “Darkest Africa” in discussing the West African coast and recounts the “discovery” of the origins of the Niger River by Mungo Park in the 1790s. The idea that this was a meaningful “discovery” would have seemed silly to the thousands of Africans who had been trading up and down the Niger for millennia, but by the nineteenth century it constituted a form of European appropriation.

3 For comments on these habits of thought as the relate to military history, see Jeremy Black, “European Overseas Expansion and the Military Revolution,” in George Raudzens, ed., Technology, Disease, and Colonial Conquests, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries: Essays Reappraising the Guns and Germs Theories (Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 1-14.
4 Colley, Captives, p. 111, offers a number of examples of English respect for Ottoman power as of the Napoleonic era.
The same problem is seen at a more elevated level in Fernand Braudel’s three-volume *Civilization and Capitalism*. There the West, initially Western Europe, is identified as the source of modern capitalism and Braudel ransacks the past to show us how it emerged. As a result, much of the 1800 pages of *Civilization and Capitalism* is about Europe and a good deal of the rest is about Europeans in other parts of the world.

Modern Westerners are often hampered by preoccupation with three dominant stereotypes -- 'nation', 'country', and 'society'. Each is part of a habit of presenting history as bounded by geographic limits that are no more than cultural conventions. Such boundaries encourage us to think in false dichotomies such as inside/outside and us/other. As Benedict Anderson suggests, national “boundaries” are a novel Western conceit that tries to associate clear and exclusive boundaries with political authority.

Geographically bounded concepts confront us with problems of definition and identity. Much of their coherence exists because observers have assumed their existence and in turn have used that assumption to organize their observations. Thus any geographically bounded entity is an imagined place or community confirmed for most by the act of depicting it on a map. The depiction then becomes a reality, at least for those not on the actual site being depicted. By this token it is obvious that Europe is an imagined community and that defining the European world as of the fifteenth century is not easy.

Europe, however defined in terms of geography, was as diverse as any similarly sized region in the world, and included a surprising number of languages and dialects. It was also politically fragmented, and, compared with the Ming Empire in China, the kings and princes of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europe look more like undisciplined provincial warlords than powerful

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rulers. Probably the most salient European common denominator was Latin Christianity, including its later Protestant variations. While Europeans fought bloody internal wars over religious orthodoxy, they all saw their version of Latin Christianity as a distinctive marker between themselves and other cultures.

Beyond that, the instability of the concept of Europe is striking. Forty years of teaching European history suggest how we have implicitly defined Europe as ending at the edge of the Turkish and Russian/Soviet Empires or at the boundary between Latin and Orthodox Christianity. In fact, the Turkish frontier moved hundreds of miles over five centuries, with the result that it is still hard for Westerners to see the Balkans as part of Europe. Europeanists have also been uncertain as to whether Russia was part of Europe, a dilemma reinforced in the twentieth century by the identification of the Iron Curtain as the boundary of the “Western world,” a mental habit that has left “Eastern” Europe and Russia in a conceptual limbo.

This has left me curious about how we might understand the European expansion of 1400 to 1700 if we framed the story using structures that transcended concepts like “country,” “Europe,” and “the Mediterranean.” The appearance of thousands of people whom we identify as European all across Africa, Asia, and the Americas ceases to be something that can be explained simply as a story of deliberate “expansion” by successive European countries.

These comments have also been conditioned by an encounter with André Gunder Frank’s ReOrient. Frank, with reason, attacks practitioners of Western history on the grounds that they live in a euro-centric epistemological cul de sac. They assume that the patterns of a single culture (that of Europeans) are universal and that Western culture and technology ought to be imitated. They also assume that Western accomplishments derive from within Western culture, a habit that implies either Western arrogance or ignorance.

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10 See, for example, David Landes, The unbound Prometheus: technological change and industrial development in Western Europe from 1750 to present (2nd edn., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)
11 An example that comes to mind is David Landes, The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So
Frank, however, also exemplifies the assumption that economic activity is the only important matrix for global history. He goes to great lengths to reaffirm established truisms about long-distance trade, namely that (1) everybody traded with somebody and, ultimately, with everybody; (2) that Europe long was a small player in the global trade system and what role she acquired was due primarily to her ability to use American silver to subsidize her entry into world trade; and (3) that little of what Europe did economically, financially, or technologically depended on techniques that were uniquely European.\textsuperscript{12}

Although global in scope, books like \textit{ReOrient} are actually not ambitious enough. They postulate a world linked together by economic networks in which trade and the exploitation of comparative advantages facilitate the spread of technology. Trade and economic affairs, while crucial, are only part of the story. Not only did trade carry with it cultural and historical materials, but trade itself was sometimes a secondary result of non-economic processes. The spread of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity often followed economic activity, but they also operated separately, facilitating later economic exchanges. Without the common legal and religious traditions that Islam provided for the Indian Ocean, for example, the economic interdependence that marked that region would have been less pronounced.\textsuperscript{13} On another front, for centuries the history of many regions was shaped by nomadic migrations out of Central Asia, Arabia, the Atlas Mountains, Scandinavia, or Northern Mexico that, among other things, shaped the spread of Islam and Christianity even as they stimulated Eurasian trade.

The global perspective can also be expanded by taking into account factors outside of human control, especially climate and disease. William McNeill has set out intriguing ideas about the interaction between disease and humanity, and that interaction has to be part of any global history. Similarly, agrarian settlement, navigation, and tribal migrations are almost certainly related to cycles

\textsuperscript{12} For a rather strident statement of this position, see John M. Hobson, \textit{The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

of hemispheric cooling and warming in the last two thousand years.

Conventional historians are rightly skeptical about finding direct links between climate change and specific events, but that is because historical narratives have relatively brief chronologies. Even so, the medieval desiccation of the Anazazi area in New Mexico, the decline of rainfall in sub-Saharan Africa, and the buildup of population on the steppes of Central Asia correlate with migrations out of Northern Mexico, the Atlas Mountains, Central Asia, and Arabia.\textsuperscript{14}

Here the evolution of this essay has been profoundly affected by Fernand Braudel’s essay on the Mediterranean world.\textsuperscript{15} This was a milestone that widened the range of questions asked about the past and it legitimized the use of a variety of models in the analysis of the geo-historical context of human activity. Whatever its limitations, his Mediterranean sought a balance between contextual determinism and individual agency and pioneered a layered conceptual model for “total history” (to use the tired cliché). That model was the now half-forgotten triad of geo-historical context, structures and institutions, and histoire événementielle. Subsequent generations of historians have added to this by articulating the psychological and cultural dimension of history in a way that parallels Braudel’s exploration of geo-historical and structural contexts. This has added a fourth element to his three-part structure, creating a more comprehensive approach to the search for human agency.\textsuperscript{16}

Braudel’s model has inspired ambitious historians to tackle other areas defined by strong maritime traditions. Some of the notable results include K. N. Chaudhuri’s *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean*

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[16]{For a comprehensive attempt to deal with this fourth element in the European context, see Thomas Munck, *The Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History*, 1721-1794 (London: Arnold, 2002).}
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from the Rise of Islam to 1750 (1990), Anthony Reid’s two-volume *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680* (1988-93), John Thornton’s *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (1992, 1998), and Michael Pearson’s *The Indian Ocean* (2003). Read together with Braudel’s *Mediterranean*, these works offer a sweeping view of the early modern world that is attractive to anyone drawn to World History. While hardly free of present-oriented concerns, these books try to understand historical process in terms of the contexts and actions of people in their own time.

These books all verify the acceleration of long distance contacts by 1400, stimulated by the continuing spread of Islam, climate change, the Mongol empire, and the bubonic plague. This essay is about one aspect of that acceleration of long-distance contact – the growing number of Europeans who became part of the global human landscape in the three centuries after 1400.

Braudel’s approach to the Mediterranean world reflects the reality that before the nineteenth century maritime transport was cheaper than overland transport. Thus it would be surprising not to find a pattern of networks that was coterminous with the Mediterranean basin. Using a different approach, Jan de Vries has shown that sixteenth-century Europe housed two distinct urban networks, one built around a cluster of cities in Mediterranean Europe, the other centered on northwestern Europe. In this context Herman Van der Wee long ago showed us how sixteenth-century Antwerp coordinated a network that transcended “national” and even “continental” limits.

All of this has prompted me to propose two alternative tools for structuring our understanding of European activity abroad before 1700. One is the idea of “urban networks,” the other of interpersonal “affinity networks.”

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21 Get ref on ambiguous nature of plague in sources.
networks show up most easily through examination of patterns of trade. Trade, politics, and other long-distance activities operated within structures that most participants took for granted. Trade, cultural exchange, and political life were all channeled through cities and intercity networks. Cities exist because they are convenient and efficient places to get things done. What gets done there may be commercial, industrial, political, religious, or cultural in nature. Large cities typically house several kinds of function, while smaller cities can be highly specialized. Regardless of the functions housed by a city, two things follow from the geographic concentration of those functions. Within the city many supplementary activities develop, if only on a scale that serves the local population attracted by the city’s main functions. More important for our discussion is the truism that most important urban functions involve interactions that extend far outside the city.

In some cases, the other end of an interaction is found in a small town or rural setting. Often this is the place where the transaction originated. The larger the city, however, the more likely a large part of its external contacts will involve other, often distant cities. This simple model allows us to visualize complex and far-reaching networks of interaction. The scope of those networks varies with the ease of transport and communication. Urban networks that were shaped by commerce could stretch very long distances over water, but overland commercial networks were more tenuous. Such trade was restricted by the high cost of land transport and featured either short distances or intrinsically valuable commodities. Political networks extended overland with greater ease because mounted armies and official messengers could travel long distances faster and at less cost than could bulky commodities.24 Political transactions, however, are constrained by the fact that they are often coercive. Thus, if the cost/benefit analysis of a distant participant in a political network becomes too negative, local elites will challenge central authority and the political relationship may break

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24 Thus Ottoman political authority could extend from Budapest to Basra, even though the two cities participated in very different commercial networks.
Where conditions allowed equitable exchanges at both ends of commercial transactions, the benefits were mutual. Thus inter-city networks based on commerce are more durable and more likely to reappear after periods of disruption.

While these comments emphasize economic and political networks, the same logic applies to religious and cultural ones. It is easy to find religious cities such as Mecca or Rome and educational centers like Salamanca where the main functions were not economic. Yet no one could deny that all three were focal points for centuries of interaction on a global scale.

This takes us toward my second organizational tool – interpersonal affinity networks. An urban network simply describes the aggregate of exchanges of goods, ideas, and people between locations. Yet each transaction involved personal decisions and prejudices on both ends of the exchange. The fact of urban interconnection thus raises questions about how and why individuals decide to do what they do and, once they have decided, about the unintended as well as premeditated consequences.

This is not a trivial matter, since a great many of the Europeans who ventured into the larger world found themselves without the military and diplomatic backing implied by euro-centric narratives of the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English “empires” of 1400-1700. The first Europeans in Africa, America, or Asia often found themselves isolated, with reinforcements a long way off both in time and space. Moreover sixteenth or seventeenth century European military technology was not notably better than that of Africa or Asia. In practice, the early European “empires” had puny resources and were more important to Europe than they were to the parts of the world they pretended to control. Outright European control in Africa and Asia was long confined to a handful of enclaves where internal dissention had created openings for outside intervention just as the Europeans arrived. The same was true of early settlements in North America, where the devastating impact of European

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25 See the detailed discussion of this as it relates to the Indian Ocean in Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 27-39.
diseases forced realignments among the decimated Native American communities just as the first settlers landed.

As one observer has pointed out: “The business of making and maintaining [European] empire always involved dependence on non-whites and non-Christians, and not merely the experience of ruling them.”

This means that we must try to make some attempt to grasp the attitudes and activities of Europeans abroad as they met other societies.

It turns out that there was remarkably little that was very distinctive about basic European social structures, family and community networks, or commercial techniques. In recent decades we have also become aware that prior to the eighteenth century Europe was hardly the most sophisticated, productive, or politically impressive part of the world. Parallels and analogues could be found everywhere and, as I suggest in the first, Europeans were quite ready to see “figures of similitude” in other societies.

All of this leads back to the observation that the primary frame of reference within which people evaluated their actions consisted of family and clan, often reinforced by membership in a geographically or professionally defined community. The boundaries of these concepts varied from one context to another, but whatever the details, individual actions were conditioned by strategies and assumptions that linked the person with the status of family and clan. Thus mercantile enterprise was conditioned by objectives and values not adequately explained by individual profit maximization -- among them familial or communal honor, revenge, power, and social status. These factors were


30 Striking examples of Asians interacting with Europeans for these reasons are found in Tapan Raychaudhuri, "The Commercial Entrepreneur in Pre-Colonial India: Aspirations and Expectations. A Note," in Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund, eds., *Emporia, Commodities, and Entrepreneurs in Asian
weighted in slightly different ways in different merchant communities, but all were important everywhere.

If we can conceive of a world of urban networks that coordinated economic or political networks, we can also conceptualize a world shaped by networks based on family, clan, and community allegiances. The links in such networks resulted from individual decisions and, in the aggregate, they constituted the inter-city transactions that, described collectively, allow us to identify urban networks. Seen in this two-tiered way, the network concept lets us incorporate a range of values and motivations that is richer than simple economic self-interest. It also highlights the ways in which the Asian, African, and American experiences of Europeans had a great deal in common.

The best way to make this point is with a few examples. Visualize seventeenth-century Madrid as the center of a political urban network that extended from Madrid to Brussels, Naples, Mexico, Peru, and the Philippines. The result is a vast web of political exchanges coordinated by institutions based in Madrid. Then visualize Barcelona as center of a commercial urban network that extended from Istanbul to Naples, Cadiz, London, and Stockholm. On a personal level, Viceroy Linhares in Goa in the 1630s provides an example of a person at the center of both the political and commercial network of Portuguese Asia and also at the center of a private network of exchanges that often transcended that official framework. Meanwhile, Khwaja Shams-ud-din Giloni, a sixteenth-century Indian entrepreneur who collaborated with the Portuguese, had personal commercial contacts that reached from Isfahan in Persia to Melaka. Philip Curtin, using American as well as Afro-Eurasian cases, outlines

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trade diasporas in which families from a given society provided trade links across hundreds of miles and between different cultures. Each of these diasporas was a network of trust based on common commercial practices, community cohesion, family loyalty, and reciprocal advantages.33

While it is tricky to use conventional class labels in a global context, a general pattern does emerge. Politically based networks are typically noble or at least self-defined as aristocratic – nominally they serve the ruler or the state. Commercially based networks tend to look bourgeois. They respond to the market rather than to political authority and in many cultures are assigned a lower status. The most marked exception to this is probably Islam. When examined closely, the boundaries between commercial/bourgeois and political/aristocratic as conceptual categories become indistinct. There is often a good deal of functional interdependence between them as well as generational, and sometimes individual, mobility across the blurred boundary between the two.

In the case of the Spanish Empire, behind the images of urban and affinity networks we find a collection of no more than a few hundred families, some aristocratic, a great many noble, and quite a few that were “common.” They operated in a complex world of communities and family-based agendas in which families were involved in both office holding and in trade. Prominent families in small towns ran local government, sent sons to university, placed them in royal and church offices, and married offspring into similar families. Such families also sent sons and daughters to be interns, trainees, and spouses in families that ran prominent family trading firms. What emerges is a network based on collective identity and family connections. Such social networks cut across politics, economics, and conventional class definitions. In the Hispanic case, these family networks were remarkably extensive: families from small Basque towns were in regular contact with relatives in Madrid, London, Cadiz, Mexico and even Manila.

33 One of the more intriguing examples alluded to by Curtin is the Armenian merchant network, which we will see more of later. Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade, pp. 179-206; see also: Anne Basil, Armenian Settlements in India From the Earliest Times to the Present Day (Calcutta, n.d., ca. 1960s)
These family networks were in turn bolstered by brotherhoods based on groups of families and villages from particular regions.34

Much the same process can be observed in Ming China. There community schools, nominally founded to reduce illiteracy, were subverted by local elites in a predictable way. As central authority became less assertive in local affairs during the sixteenth century, local elites turned these schools into academies that provided the training necessary to pass the Imperial Civil Service examinations. This allowed local elites, made wealthy thanks to general economic expansion, to place family members in the imperial bureaucracy. This in turn made the bureaucracy more responsive to local interests and correspondingly lax about enforcing imperial policies that threatened local elites.35

These family and community-based networks provided the materials from which commercial and political urban networks were constructed. They not only supplied the agency sought by historians, but in a more concrete way, provided the people who inhabited and operated the institutions through which formal transactions were implemented. They are also networks that allow the historian to approach the interaction of belief, values, intention, and opportunity that shaped specific actions.

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After about 1400 European support systems and the individuals within them began to extend their reach beyond Europe and the Mediterranean. As they did so, they began to interact with parts of a world that often were wealthier, sometimes were more sophisticated, and differently organized than Europe. In describing these encounters, many modern accounts of European expansion ignore the reality that non-European societies, governments, and individuals were typically more open to outsiders than were their European counterparts. Most coastal African and Asian polities regularly engaged in trade with outsiders

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34 For a detailed discussion of this in the case of early modern Spain, see David R. Ringrose, Spain, Europe, and the “Spanish miracle,” 1700-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 331-388.
and often depended on the revenue it produced. The sources also give us glimpses of coastal exchanges on both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of the Americas. Port cities were perennially involved in interdependent exchanges between culturally distinct communities and usually were usually open to new commercial opportunities while avoiding policies that drove merchants to other ports. Newcomers who acknowledged local authority, brought useful skills, sold attractive merchandise, contributed interesting ideas, and stayed within locally accepted codes of behavior usually were well received.36

Seen in this light, the rhetorical question “How did Europeans fit in?” becomes “Why wouldn’t they find niches in the larger world?” After all, they did - by 1700 Europeans were part of a system of trade and politics that stretched between Europe, Africa, China, and Japan and connected those areas to America. This is not to say that Europeans did not resort to coercion or encounter difficulties, some of them of their own making. Nor were the areas that they entered uniformly peaceful or accommodating. Yet the situation does prompt us to wonder about the nature of everyday interactions and to look for non-coercive factors that facilitated the presence of Europeans in so many parts of the world. In this light the accounts of the recurrent European use of force make us wonder if they were forcing their way through an open door.

The story that this implies is one that postpones the era of European hegemony in Asia and Africa until well after 1700 – something that historians of Asia have long recommended. It is also a story that reduces the prominence of economic and commercial factors. While extremely important, economics do not always explain how things worked in face-to-face situations. The story also begins well before Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama in the 1490s.

To understand how Europeans made their way into the larger world, we have to set aside assumptions about European-ness, territorially defined nation states, the primacy of maritime routes, and the primacy of economic and imperialist motives. The self-proclaimed European empires of the sixteenth

through eighteenth centuries spread as much by collaboration as by conquest and force. Moreover, “empire” was far from a uniquely European phenomenon since European expansion was paralleled by the stories of the Russian, Ottoman, Persian, Mughal, and Chinese Empires.

The language of urban networks and affinity networks sometimes seems awkward, but hopefully it avoids some of the assumptions provoked by the term “imperialism.” It also shifts attention from origin and culture to function and pragmatic opportunity and encourages us to rethink the distinctiveness of “European” as a category.

Obviously, some of the so-called Europeans who went abroad after 1400 identified themselves with one or another of the countries we recognize as European. These are the protagonists of many narratives of European expansion. Even here, however, the identity of such adventurers as Gadifer de Lasalle is ambiguous. He led an invasion of the Canary Islands with a charter from the King of Castile, but he led a motley crew of adventurers, came from Flanders, and at one point served the King of France.37

Other participants are not so comfortably identified as “European,” but nevertheless had deep connections within Europe. The most obvious example is the Jews. They, and the communities of Jews who had been forced to become nominal Christians, were an established part of Europe’s social landscape. At the same time, they maintained a remarkable set of networks that cut across political and geographic boundaries from Brazil to the Middle East. The Greeks offer a similar case. They practiced a form of Christianity, spoke a language highly regarded by European intellectuals, and were regular participants in Europe’s Mediterranean trade. At the same time, however, many early modern Greeks were subjects of the Ottoman Empire, a reality that complicated their European identity and reminds us that the nominally Muslim Ottoman Empire actively traded with Christian Europe.38

37 Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Before Columbus, p. ??
38 This is illustrated for the later Russian context by Vassilis Kardasis, Diaspora Merchants in the Black Sea: The Greeks in Southern Russia, 1775-1861 Lanham, MD, 2001).
Another ethnic community that facilitated the widening European presence was less obviously European and came from outside of Europe as conventionally defined. The Armenians were routinely present in European ports, they were Christians of a sort, and shared enough common culture so that they were not seen as “other.” When encountered abroad, they were accessible to Europeans as relatively familiar trading partners, agents, or intermediaries. By 1700 the Armenian merchant network reached from Manila to London and played a role in the overland networks of Southwest Asia.

Counter-intuitively, Muslim elites sometimes provided familiar intermediaries. While regarded as hostile “others” in North Africa, when encountered in the Indian Ocean, Muslims spoke a familiar language (Arabic) and were easier for the Portuguese to relate to than even less familiar African and Asian communities. Moreover, other communities previously unknown to Europeans – Gujeratis, Multanis, Hindu merchants, and overseas Chinese – were found to have similar goals and ways of doing business. Just to cite one example, the overseas Chinese were crucial to the successes of the Dutch in Batavia/Jakarta.

Seen in this way, early European expansion is not a story of European hegemony – that is a phenomenon of the later eighteenth century and after. It is a story of individualized mutual accommodation and collaboration. Admittedly Europeans contributed a certain propensity to include force as a part of commercial negotiation, and this added a new element to the mix of Afro-Asian maritime interaction. Faced with the sophistication, flexibility, and adaptability of the societies that Europeans encountered, however, collaboration and accommodation were crucial to the ongoing European presence. Then, as now, the future was unknown and the European hegemony of the nineteenth century was beyond the conceptual possibilities of anyone in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries.

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