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978-0-521-78795-6 - Archaeology and Colonialism: Cultural Contact from 5000 BC to the Present

Chris Gosden

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction

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The word ‘colonialism’ is a relatively recent coinage in the English language. We first have evidence of it in 1853 when ‘colonialism’ was used to mean practices or idioms peculiar to, or characteristic of, a colony. Only in 1886 was it first used to mean the colonial system or principle, thus referring to colonialism as a systematic and wide-ranging phenomenon. The term has an immediate root in the word ‘colonial’ and it was used in the late eighteenth century to refer to features like the architecture or furniture of the thirteen British colonies that were to become the United States of America. ‘Colonial’ referred primarily to styles of material culture and was a term Americans used about a period of their own history. Only in 1796 did ‘colonial’ cross the Atlantic, to be used by Edmund Burke. The usage of ‘colonial’ helps highlight twin themes of this book: colonialism is about material culture, a fact vital for archaeology; but also colonialism had a cultural effect on all parties, so that Britain was colonised through contacts with north America, as much as the American colonies were creations of Britain. The import of the word ‘colonial’ across the Atlantic was just a tiny tithe of the colonial influences flowing into the metropolitan centres of Europe.

The word ‘colonial’ is in turn created from the word ‘colony’, which has a more ancient history. ‘Colony’ first appeared in English in 1382 in Wycliffe’s translation of the Bible, but this appears to be an early, isolated example and we have no evidence of the word’s use again until 1548 when it describes a settlement in a new country, forming a community subject to a parent state. English ‘colony’ was a direct translation of the Latin *colonia*, which referred to a settlement, often of veteran soldiers, in hostile or conquered territory. This meaning of the word derived from a more general sense in which *colonia* was used to refer to a farm, settlement or landed estate, deriving from the noun *colonus* (tiller farmer, planter or settler in a new country) linked to the verb *colere* (to cultivate, till or inhabit). In this most ancient meaning, colony was linked to cultivation, a fact with considerable future resonance when, in the modern period, native inhabitants were denied rights to the land as they did not till or

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[More information](#)

## 2 Archaeology and Colonialism

improve it, a doctrine of law known as *terra nullius* and only recently overturned as the legal basis of land ownership in places like Australia. Colonialism and cultivation were linked in a more general cultural and spiritual sense, as, from at least the Romans onwards, to create a colony was partly to fulfil a cultural mission to raise savages and barbarians to a more acceptable state. Colonialism was connected with cities and bringing the benefits of urban living.

The idea of a colony, subject to a parent power, is a very old one. The idea of colonialism is not, as the history of the word shows. We should be alert at the outset of any historical enquiry to the dangers of anachronism; of imputing meanings attached to colonialism that first arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to early periods of history in which colonies may have been in existence. As 'colony' is the more ancient word, we might seem to be on firmer ground when considering colonies. However, many of the problems of addressing this topic come from a conflation of the meanings of the two key terms 'colony' and 'colonialism'. For many, colonialism only occurs when there are colonies, so that much effort has been expended on deciding whether colonies existed in particular times and places in the past.

Deciding whether colonies existed or not might seem a simple matter. Let us take a commonsense view of what establishing a colony involves. In such a simple view, we have a metropolitan power (for instance, Uruk, Athens, Rome, Tenochtitlan, London) which sends out people to a geographically distant and culturally different area (northern Mesopotamia, southern Gaul, northern Africa, the lowlands of Mexico or the Atlantic seaboard of America). A colony is established by people with different genes, language, customs (including religion), civic layout, artefacts and burial customs when compared with the existing local population. Archaeological criteria for judging whether a settlement was a colony or not depend on using those traits that have a material expression (civic layout, material culture and burial customs) and deciding how far they differ from the existing cultural background and to what extent they can be linked to a foreign centre of origin. Motives for establishing colonies include trade, the desire to disperse excess population, military advantage or gaining control of local resources. Such motives are mainly pragmatic ones of economic or military power. Political control might be loosely exercised, or colonies might be bound more tightly into imperial structures. Older views of colonies saw the colonists as dominant; now, of course, we are more inclined to credit local people with agency. A greater stress on agency has not changed the basic model of a colony and the idea that colonialism only exists once colonies do.

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As an example of this form of thought in action, we can take the admirable clarity of Moses Finley's answer to the question 'What is a colony?' Finley (1976) followed the usage of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in seeing a colony as a settlement created through large-scale immigration from a homeland, which had appropriated land from the indigenous population, subjugating them in the process, controlling their labour force and instituting formal political and economic control from the homeland. A mismatch in the scale and potency of the two parties to the colonial encounter was crucial, with native peoples seen as 'technically backward, small scale in their political organisation, incapable of concerted action, as compared with their European conquerors. Above all they were . . . hopelessly outclassed in their ability to apply force' (Finley 1976: 184). Such a view makes modern colonialism more potent and purposive than it was, but, more importantly, it excludes many earlier cases from consideration. The early Greek settlements in the Mediterranean, those of the Phoenicians, the Hellenistic settlements in Persia or the Genoese trading stations are all deemed non-colonial on the grounds that not enough direct and effective control was operated from the homeland.

Rather than focusing on the colony as the central defining feature of colonialism, I take a different view. Although the word 'colony' has an older history than 'colonialism', I feel colonies only gained recognisable form once state power was considerable, and for earlier periods colonialism existed without colonies. Colonialism is a particular grip that material culture gets on the bodies and minds of people, moving them across space and attaching them to new values. These values often have a centre – southern Mesopotamia, Greece or Rome – but this is a symbolic centre, as much as a geographical one. Power emanates from artefacts and practices connected to that centre, rather than from the metropolis and its economic or military superiority. The new symbolic centre has power by virtue of the fact that it is associated with novel, but compelling, sets of materials and practices. For example, to take the case closest to Moses Finley's heart, the Greek settlements in the Mediterranean from the eighth century onwards. It has been argued convincingly that these were not initially deliberate settlements by the Greek city states, but accumulations of people around new centres of trade and metal exploitation, who also adopted Greek material culture without being Greek themselves (Osborne 1998). Indeed, the material culture we now call Greek is a combination of influences from around the Mediterranean to which the 'colonies' contributed and the notion of 'Greekness' was probably fluid and changeable at this early period (I explore this example in more detail in chapter 4).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Archaeology and Colonialism

As I shall discuss in more detail in chapter 3, colonialism is crucially a relationship with material culture, which is spatially extensive (in the Greek case covering most of the Mediterranean) and destabilising of older values, so changing all concerned – incomers and natives. It is less to do with production or exchange, unlike in older models, and more centred on consumption. In the Greek case, the sets of materials and practices connected with the *symposion*, plus the broader ambit of Greek mythology and religious sensibility together with urban life, are the crucial elements of change. What these new values do is to set up a circulation system of people, ideas and artefacts which change all concerned and which have multiple sources. It is not just that the colonisers change the colonised, as these two categories do not exist in simple form, but rather that all involved are changed by the process of circulation, whether they live in the symbolic centres or outside. In chapter 3 I outline a typology of colonialism and two of my three categories do not emphasise the centrality of colonies to colonialism.

Another of my starting premises is that colonialism in the post-Columbian world is very different from colonial cultures of the earlier past (and I also feel that modern colonialism has not been well understood in its own terms – see chapter 6). Because of this, I do not want to be drawn down intellectual routes that emphasise politics or economics as we would currently understand them, as these tend to emphasise elements of life which make most sense to us in understanding the modern world and are least helpful in seeing how colonial forms of the past were different.

Prior to modern colonialism, shared cultural values provided the social space for people to expand into and move around in, on those occasions when material culture takes on shared aesthetic or commensal values. Only over the last 500 years have technologies of transport, supply and agriculture allowed people to move way beyond their own cultural homelands into totally alien worlds. Even here, chaotic early contacts gave way to a new system of global culture set up after 1750, which really did span the whole world. This was less symbolically centred than earlier types of colonialism, partly because of the important input that the colonies had in influencing the metropolises, so that the culture of Britain, for instance, was as much a cultural product as that of the United States. The English were Anglicised through their empire at least as much as through events that happened at ‘home’. The same may also be true for the Romans, Aztecs or Chinese.

Some of the colonial input was through the links with local indigenous people, who helped in the subversion and reinterpretation of dominant values, contributing thereby to the global system, rather than just being

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its victims. In making modern colonialism different from antecedent varieties we need to explain what has made it different, rather than taking it as the implicit standard for all forms of colonialism.

In one aspect modern colonialism is related to earlier types: colonialism and its values always involve material culture. Some of the most compelling and influential thoughts on modern power systems are those of Gramsci and Foucault, who looked at how people become deeply attached to systems of value, through what Foucault has called 'biopower'. The internalisation of values in our bodies is crucial in creating us as people and subjects, but it does miss the vital point that values are created and carried through our bodily relations to material culture, so that our unconscious and habitual acts in the material world are vital, especially through patterns of consumption. Material culture creates a vital thread to follow through the whole history of colonialism, so that my argument in comparing colonialisms is partly a meditation on the nature of our relations with the material world. My aim in this book is not to provide a ready-made series of models of colonialism, but rather to develop a toolbox useful for both unpicking older views and generating new notions of power, interaction and encounter.

If I started by looking at the history of usage of 'colonialism', two other key terms need also to be looked at: imperialism and culture contact. Notions of empire and imperialism are relatively easily dealt with. It is hard to use the term 'empire' without following a political definition of what an empire is. An empire is thought to exist where there is some overarching political control over subject colonies. Imperialism is a special case of colonialism where there are colonies tied together into one political structure, which has a series of ideological, economic and cultural implications. As I am trying to create an archaeological approach to colonialism with material culture, people and power at its centre, conventional views of politics are not the place to start. Political scientists and those interested in international relations do not start with material culture, looking more at personal and institutional links and structures. Material culture is key to my consideration of colonialism and so I shall mention empires, but not dwell on the concept. Dividing culture contact from colonialism is trickier. As there is no such thing as an isolated culture, all cultural forms are in contact with others. Culture contact is a basic human fact. Yet the nature of contacts between cultures varies enormously, and what differentiates colonialism from other aspects of contact are issues of power, which, in the approach I am developing, is a differential power of material culture to galvanise and move people. Colonialism brings a new quality (or rather inequality) to human relations.

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[More information](#)

## 6 Archaeology and Colonialism

Archaeology has a special role to play in the study of colonialism. Archaeology is the only discipline that can cover the full temporal range of colonial forms over the millennia. Almost all examples of colonialism have left us a written record, but this is always only partial. The idea that history is written by the victors is not new, nor is it totally true, but it happened often enough to leave a skewed record, especially as many involved in face-to-face colonial encounters had little inclination or leisure to write down accounts of what happened.

A comparative archaeology of colonialism which looks at all times and places where colonial relations existed cross-cuts internal disciplinary boundaries. Archaeologists of Mesopotamia or the classical period in the Mediterranean, or those looking at central and southern America or the establishment of nation states in north America, south Africa and Australasia, rarely have the occasion to talk to each other, or even a common language when they do make the attempt. And yet there are comparisons and contrasts to be made between all these periods, which can enlighten our understanding of any one of them. Calls to create a broader comparative basis for historical archaeology (see a number of contributions in Funari *et al.* 1999) rarely mention colonialism explicitly as posing questions which need comparative answers. Indeed some historical archaeologists would like to see the subdiscipline being true to its roots which lie in the analysis of modern settler societies over the last few centuries. The one explicit call for a broader view of colonialism comes from Rowlands (1998), where building on an earlier article on hybridity and creole forms of culture (Rowlands 1994) he looks at how colonial contacts can create new dimensions of life with unexpected consequences. Both these articles have provided me with considerable inspiration, although I have come to think that a model based on language change, such as those looking at the formation of pidgins and creoles, does not provide quite a full enough basis for understanding the material manifestations colonialism takes.

Colonialism is *the* major cultural and historical fact of the last 500 years and to some extent the last 5000 years, although it is said that now we live in a post-colonial world. In some formal sense this is true: colonies are few and empires are absent from the contemporary scene. On the other hand, we are still wrestling with the economic, social and intellectual consequences of colonialism. When colonialism is viewed comparatively it is disruptive of our views of people, power and objects. By looking at the varying forms power can take we learn much about the past and unlearn much about the present.



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[More information](#)

## 2 Earlier approaches to colonialism

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Colonialism is one of the great mirrors of our time: all those who look into the mirror tend to see the reflection of their own preoccupations and views of the world. There are two broad sets of other approaches to colonialism that have been, and still are, influential for archaeologists: the world systems literature and post-colonial theory. Neither of these is totally adequate when seeking to understand colonialism from an archaeological point of view. The world systems literature is global in its coverage, as you might expect from its name, and attempts to cover 5000 years of human history in looking at the long-term genesis and development of core-periphery systems. Such a breadth and depth of perspective has been extremely useful in relocating particular developments, like the rise of Europe for instance, within broader trends. However, the world systems theorists generally have not developed convincing theories of human relationships with the material world and use the terms of modern economics to understand trade, interaction and accumulation over the last 5000 years. Fundamental changes have occurred in people's relations with the material world over that time and these form major aspects of history that a consideration of colonialism must attempt to explain.

The post-colonial literature looks down the telescope from the other end, stressing the local, the contingent and the agency of the colonised. Post-colonial theory attempts to provide new accounts of colonialism, moving right away from the histories written by the victors, focusing instead on the local cultures of colonised peoples and the sets of resources these have offered for resistance, subversion and reinterpretation of the designs of the colonists. What post-colonial theory again generally lacks is a consideration of the material world, discussing instead the varying discourses and texts brought into contact and conflict through the colonial process. The exception to this is anthropologists of colonialism, who have stressed that local agency can best be understood through attending to the types of exchanges between colonists and colonial subjects, looking at the manner in which the same sets of things may be given different values by the various parties.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Archaeology and Colonialism

I take inspiration from the post-colonial theorists, but consider that a greater feel for the material nature of relations is needed. The breadth of the world systems theorists needs to be complemented by greater depth of thinking about the values attached to people and to things, using the modern world less as the standard by which the past should be understood. Both sets of thinkers draw on older patterns of thought – a key inspiration for Wallerstein, whose work launched the world systems debates, has been Marx. Wallerstein's idea is that the development of capitalism in Europe cannot be understood apart from the history of European colonialism, as the colonies supplied labour, raw materials and markets on which Europe came to depend. The world systems literature has come to critique ideas that are too Eurocentric, and in mounting this critique has come close to the ideas of post-colonial theorists. Post-colonial thinkers also take some of their interest in social change and liberation from Marx. I have been inspired by Marx's materialism, but think that a stress on production needs to be complemented with an interest in consumption and the manner in which things are used to build human relations both within and between cultures.

**The rise of the west**

One key element of recent history writing has been the growth of modern forms of statehood, personhood and economic formations in Europe. A vital contributor has been Marx, who was interested in history as a record of how people developed their skills and capabilities, or how these were constrained. It was the development of human being and experience that Marx, following Hegel, was ultimately interested in. Capitalism grew out of the fall of feudalism, with a rediscovery of ancient science and philosophy and a massive injection of wealth extracted from the colonies of the European powers, which led to the Industrial Revolution, creating the world in which Marx lived. Marx saw capitalism as an inherently contradictory system based around the production of surplus value. Capitalism was seen as a series of social relations ordered round the appropriation of surplus human labour in the form of commodities. Human labour is capable of producing objects of greater value than the cost of supporting the people carrying out the work, especially under conditions of mechanised production. Given the inherently competitive nature of the capitalist economy, the owners of industry are continuously looking for new sources of investment, new cheap forms of labour and raw materials, and untapped markets.

Plantations, mines and colonies were, in Marx's view, vital to the development of capitalism, because they were a source of new categories



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[More information](#)

of labour and raw materials, an arena in which novel markets could be created and an outlet for the surplus population of Europe (Marx 1973). The growth of capitalism in Europe, which saw a profound break from the feudal world, was made possible by its colonial links (Figure 2.1 shows the mainly Eurasian links that existed prior to the creation of the modern colonial world). Crises in capitalism, such as when the rate of profit fell or because the market was saturated with commodities, could only be overcome through expansion. Europe, and later north America, progressively exported capitalist modes of production and sale to the rest of the world.

Thus, in Marx's view Europe had created the modern world after feudalism's downfall. Although China and India had produced massive wealth, the relatively static nature of their social systems and theocratic structures inhibited the investment of wealth needed to create the massive productivity of industrial capitalism. The rise of the west on the crest of a capitalist wave was not so much a good thing in itself; it was a phenomenon which created the conditions for truly healthy ways of life which would arise from its demise. There was an unconscious, but real, ethnocentrism in Marx's work which saw all the important developments of world history as having occurred in the continent where he happened to live.

Marx did not equate capitalism with civilisation. The barbarous, exploitative elements of world capitalism needed to be overcome before a civilised lifestyle for all could be established. Weber, who described his intellectual life as an argument with the ghost of Marx, had a rather more positive view. Weber was also interested in the rise of capitalism and the Protestant spirit of self-denial and rational thought that underlay it. For Weber, the rise of the Protestant spirit in the Reformation, set against a lavish personal lifestyle and ostentatious value-destroying displays of wealth, provided the perfect conditions for investment of wealth in future production which lay at the heart of the capitalist cycle of investment for future profit. Rational thought led to a questioning of orthodoxies, new ways of seeing the world and an outburst of inventiveness, which created both modern science and the technology needed for the Industrial Revolution. Capitalism arose not purely or mainly as an economic phenomenon, but as a question of spirit and attitude, religious in origin but of massive worldly effect. In the final chapter of *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* Weber explicitly addressed the question of why India and China, the two other main candidates as leading players in world history, had fallen behind Europe. His answer was that their theocratic structures lacked the right spirit of inventiveness, questioning and self-denial and this was the ultimate demonstration of his thesis: India

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[More information](#)

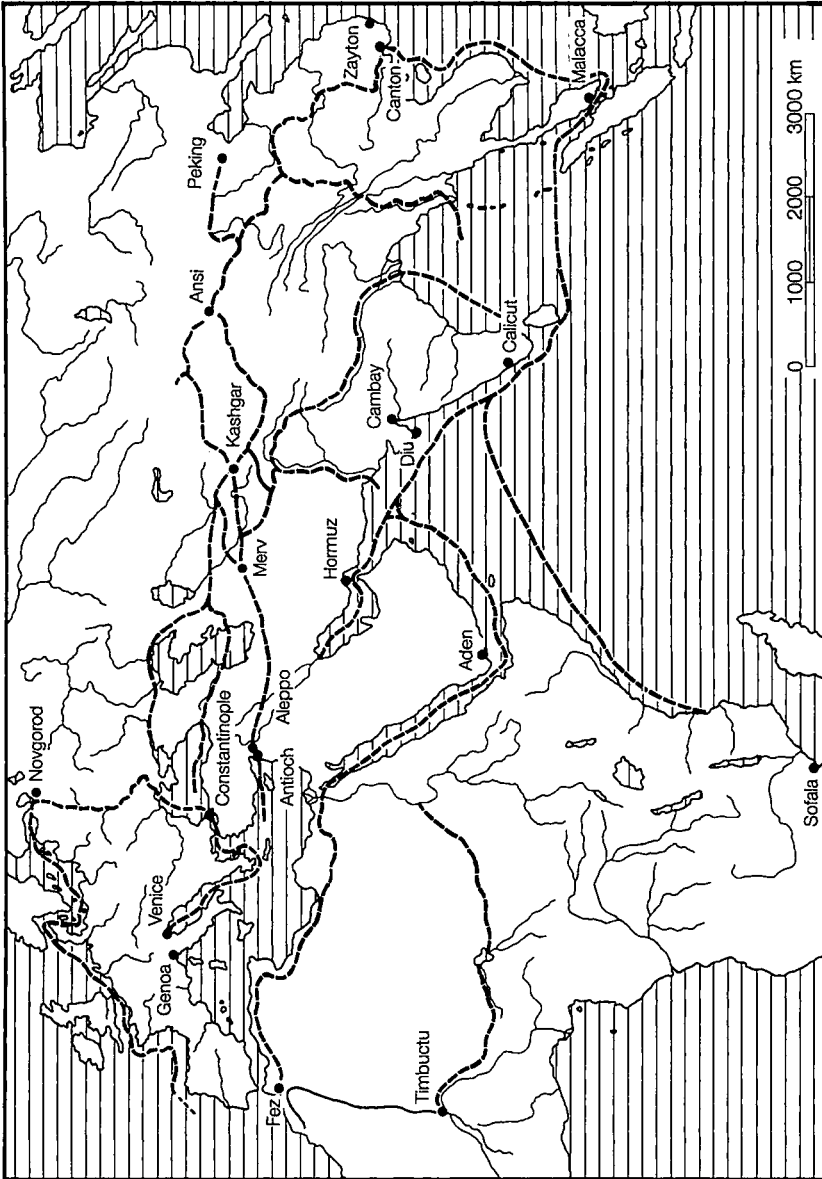


Fig. 2.1 The Old World in 1400 (after Wolf 1982: 28)