

# Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan and John Pory: Race and the dawn of the British Empire

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the significance of John Pory's translation of Leo Africanus / Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan's *Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600, rpt. 1896). It has been claimed that Pory was the first known racist to set foot in North America and so should be acknowledged as a founding father of American prejudice. This essay explores this claim, demonstrating that Pory's translation is indeed racist but wonders whether the search for origins provides an explanation of subsequent ways of thinking and events. Using the work of Marshall Sahlins the article makes the case that structural change is a more important phenomenon than origin and argues that moments of transformation should be key to our understanding of the past.

**KEYWORDS:** Africa, Leo Africanus, Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan, Barbados, Bermuda, British Empire, colonies, John Pory, race, slavery, Virginia, whiteness.

## **Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan y John Pory: Raza y el amanecer del Imperio Británico**

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo explora la relevancia de la traducción de John Pory de *Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600, rpt. 1896) de Leo Africanus / Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan. Se ha afirmado que Pory fue, que se sepa, el primer racista que habitó Norteamérica y que, por lo tanto, debe ser reconocido como figura fundacional del prejuicio americano. Este artículo explora esta afirmación, demostrando que la traducción de Pory es, de hecho, racista, pero reflexiona sobre si la búsqueda de los orígenes permite explicar formas de pensar y acontecimientos posteriores. Partiendo del trabajo de Marshall Sahlins, este artículo defiende que el cambio estructural es un fenómeno más importante que el del origen y argumenta que los momentos de transformación deberían ser la clave para nuestra comprensión del pasado.

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## **Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan e John Pory: Raça e a alvorada do Império Britânico**

**RESUMO:** Este artigo explora a significância da tradução de John Pory de *Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600, rpt. 1896) de Leo Africanus / Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan. Tem sido afirmado que Pory foi o primeiro racista que conhecemos a ter estado na América do Norte e que, por isso, deve ser reconhecido como um dos fundadores do preconceito na América. Este ensaio investiga esta afirmação, demonstrando que a tradução de Pory é, de facto, racista, mas questionando-se sobre se a procura das origens permite explicar formas de pensar e acontecimentos subsequentes. Utilizando o trabalho de Marshall Sahlins, este artigo defende que a mudança estrutural é um fenómeno mais importante do que a origem e argumenta que os momentos de transformação devem ser fundamentais para a nossa compreensão do passado.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** África, Leo Africanus, Al-Hassan Muhammad al-Wazzan, Barbados, Bermudas, Império Britânico, coló-

nias, John Pory, raza, esclavitud, Virgínia, branquitude. nias, John Pory, raça, escravatura, Virgínia, branquitude.

## 1. The Search for Origins

Recently, Ibram M. Kendi has made a forceful case that “all students of American history” should know the name of John Pory because he “can be identified as America’s first known racist [...] Based on the available evidence, Pory appears to have been America’s first known articulator of racist ideas in a murky and complex history that can be traced back to those early years of the colonial era” (Kendi 2016a; Kendi 2016b, ch. 1).

Kendi’s claim is one of a number of studies, inspired by the advent of critical race theory, that try to either uncover the origin of racism, or to show that there was racialisation before race-based encounters actually took place. Such studies invariably foreground skin pigmentation as the primary marker of racial difference for European thinkers to show that European racism has deep roots and that it is largely based on colour, “white” being valued highly, especially in a Christian tradition, representing goodness and the light, and “black” represented as its converse, the appearance of darkness and evil.<sup>1</sup>

Kendi’s claim is based principally on two salient pieces of information. First, Pory’s statements of racial difference in his prefatory remarks to his translation of the book by the man he called Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600, reprint 1896). Second, his involvement in the Virginia Company and his role as the first speaker and therefore the “first legislative leader” in British colonial America, making him for Kendi both a thinker and a historical actor in promulgating colonialism and racism. Pory was able to set the price of tobacco as the first enslaved Africans arrived in 1619. Therefore, according to Kendi, “the English translator of Leo Africanus’s thoroughly racist book [became] the first known influential Englishman on America soil with a record of articulating racist ideas” (2016a). For Kendi, Pory, following Leo Africanus, believed that blackness connoted inferiority, and that whiteness was always superior. For many climate theorists, the only way that Africans could become the equals of their white counterparts was to move to more temperate zones. Pory, however, rejected this explanation and argued instead that such distinctions “must be ‘hereditary,’ [and that]

<sup>1</sup> There is now a substantial body of work that explores the ancient/medieval roots of European racism. See, in particular, Ramey (2016), Whittaker (2019), Kim (2021).

Negroes and blacke Moores are descended from Ham the cursed son of Noah" (Kendi 2016a).<sup>2</sup>

Kendi is right to point to the racist debate between "curse theorists" and "climate theorists" in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, who argued whether humans could change if they moved continent, or whether their identities were fixed (Hodgen 1964; Floyd-Wilson 2003). Furthermore, it is surely impossible now to assert that the Middle Ages were innocent of racial prejudice and that ideas of race are a modern invention (Heng 2011). The question is whether notions of race in early Medieval Europe were based almost entirely on skin colour, or whether other factors, such as religion, played their part, and, indeed, whether prejudice against other peoples, such as the Jews, Ottomans (Muslims), and indigenous peoples within Europe who were deemed "inferior" (e.g., the Irish, the Slavs), were more important than the denigration of people with "black skin" from Africa (Bartlett 2001). Few would dispute that anti-black racism has become one of the primary forms of modern racism (if not the primary form) and that it was either the cause or the consequence of the Atlantic slave trade. But has that always been the case? Europeans were indeed prejudiced against black people in the Middle Ages, but was this the most important form of prejudice and does it explain a subsequent history of race, colonialism, and slavery? Put another way, how much will the search for the origins of a prejudice actually tell us about a subsequent history?

## 2. Al-Wazzan and John Pory

Accordingly, we need to examine Kendi's claims, first, establishing the identities of the two principal actors to whom he refers before we can explore their significance in terms of wider histories of racial prejudice. Al-Hasan Muhammad al-Wazzan al Gharnati, also – perhaps formerly – known as Leo Africanus or John Leo (1494–c.1554) was a scholar and a diplomat, born in Granada (Africanus 2023, introduction, x–xiv; Davies 2008). He led an exciting life – perhaps rather too exciting. His family subsequently moved to Fez (in modern Morocco), and he accompanied his uncle on various diplomatic missions and probably got to know North Africa rather well. In 1518 he was captured by Spanish pirates and imprisoned on the island of Rhodes, escaping a life as a galley slave probably because he was a distinguished scholar. He ended up

<sup>2</sup> On the importance of the story of Ham, see below, p. 82.

working for Pope Leo X, where he got his name, John Leo (Johannes Leo de Medicis/Giovanni Leone), and was baptised as a Christian. After Pope Leo's death in 1521 he travelled in Italy before returning to Rome under the patronage of Pope Clement VII, where he completed his book, *The History and Geography of Africa*, published in 1550, subsequently translated into Latin and French in 1556. Little is known of his later life: he either stayed in Rome or returned to Africa, perhaps leaving Italy after the Sack of Rome in 1527.

John Pory (1572–1636) was also a significant figure. He was a protégé of the great compiler of English travel, Richard Hakluyt, who persuaded Pory, a skilled linguist, to translate al-Wazzan's work. Pory completed his assigned task and produced a printed version in 1600, with several additions about African people (Powell 1977, 14–17). Pory travelled in Europe, then became an Member of Parliament, and was well known to the great and the good, befriending many intellectuals, including Sir Robert Cotton and William Camden, and he had links to writers such as Ben Jonson and John Donne. He later became secretary to the governor of the recently established Virginia Company in 1619, returning to London for the last decade of his life in 1624.

Al-Wazzan's book became "the standard source of information about Africa in English until early in the nineteenth century when contemporary European travellers began to publish their own accounts" (Powell 1977, 16). Kendi is particularly (and rightly) incensed by Pory's thumbnail sketch of the peoples of Africa (one of his additions), which is worth quoting at some length as it stands as a useful basis for exploring Pory's thinking:

This part of the worlde is inhabited especially by five principall nations, to wit, by the people called Cafri or Cafates, that is to say outlawes, or lawlesse, by the Abassins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Africans or Moores, properly so called; which last are of two kinds, namely white or tawnie Moores, and Negros or blacke Moores. Of all which nations some are Gentiles which of religions in Africa worship Idols; others of the sect of Mahumet; some others Christians; and some Jewish in religion; the greatest part of which people are thought to be descended from Cham the cursed sun of Noah; except some Arabians of the lineage of Sent, which afterward passed into Africa. Now the Arabians inhabiting Africa are divided into many severall kinds, possessing divers and sundrie habitations and regions; for some dwell neere the sea shore, which retain the name of Arabians; but other inhabiting the inland, are called Baduini.

There bee likewise infinite swarmes of Arabians, which with their wives and children, leade a vagrant and roguish life in the deserts, using tents in stead of houses: these are notable theeves, and very troublesome both to their neighbour-inhabitants, and also to merchants: for which cause travellers and merchants dare not passe over the African deserts alone, but onely in Carovans, which are great companies of merchants riding, and transporting their goods upon their camels and asses: who go very strong, and in great numbers, for feare of the said theevish Arabians. (Africanus 1896, I, 20–1)

This is a complicated and rather convoluted passage, which turns to a variety of modes of explanation to make sense of the peoples of Africa. We might make a series of observations and comments so that we can evaluate Kendi's claims and work out how we should read Pory's race work.

First, Pory follows al-Wazzan – I will call him that after Natalie Zemon Davis, but retain the title given to him by authors and editors to distinguish different editions in the notes – in imagining Africa as North Africa from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean coastline. He makes use of ancient authorities – in large part the most obvious authority, Ptolemy, the most celebrated geographer of the ancient world – to make the case that his author has done for Africa what William Camden did for Britain in his chorographic overview of the island. In the prefatory material, epistles addressed to Robert Cecil and the reader, Pory praises al-Wazzan as a stylist and thinker who should be thought of alongside the great writers of the Roman world who came from Spain – Seneca, Quintilian, Juvenal, Pomponius Mela – a direct result of imperial expansion (Africanus 1896, I, 4, 11). He should also be considered alongside the great writers on Africa from the ancient world – Ptolemy, Strabo, Pliny, Diodorus Sicilius – a manoeuvre designed, as Pory makes clear, to counteract his origins as a Moor and a “Mohammedan.” Accordingly, we might consider Pory's motives in following his mentor, Richard Hakluyt, who persuaded him to undertake his translation, as Pory made Africa knowable for an English audience, in both good and bad ways, the influence of the work demonstrating how successful his enterprise was (Powell 1977, 10, 13).

The passage further demonstrates that al-Wazzan has been assimilated into a classical, Europeanised tradition, producing knowledge that can be read alongside the work of the ancients and their representation of the world. More significantly, perhaps, Africa, for English readers,

was principally North Africa until the nineteenth century, hence the thoroughly racist belief in the unknown “dark” continent and the ease with which the English could close their eyes to the realities of the Atlantic slave trade (Jones 1987; Jarosz 1992). Perhaps a case could be made that what al-Wazzan and Pory do not write facilitates racist attitudes as much – or even more – than what they do write.

Second, we should also note that Pory practises what Katherine Dauge-Roth and Craig Koslofsky has called the “epidermilization” of races, the concentration on the skin colour of the peoples he represents (Dauge-Roth and Koslofsky 2023, 259). In dividing up humans in this way Pory is, of course, not alone and readers of his mentor, Richard Hakluyt, would have found numerous other examples of distinctions between peoples based on skin colour in his *Principal Navigations* (1589, 1598–1600). An account of John Hawkins’s first voyage from Africa to the West Indies notes that the captain observed that “Negroes were very good merchandise in Hispaniola,” and that a “store of Negroes might easily bee had upon the coast of Guinea,” so he decides to trade in such people anticipating a handsome profit (Hakluyt 1927, VII, 5). Africans have been reduced to commodities, clearly because of their black skin. George Best (1555–1588), who sailed on Martin Frobisher’s second and third voyages to North America, reflects extensively on racial difference in his account of Frobisher’s three voyages to discover the North-West Passage. For Best, whose account has much in common with Pory’s, the bad sons of Ham, Noah’s son, are rendered black because of their wickedness, “the curse and natural infection of blood” passed down through generations, and not the hot African climate. Black is a sign of God’s wrath, the skin colour of the evil rebels, “so blacke and loathsome,” which stands as a “spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde” (Hakluyt 1927, V, 182). The story’s origin is that Noah’s cursed son was turned black on account of his sin, after seeing his father naked after he had had rather too much to drink (Gen. 9:20–7). The Bible verses, which make no mention of Ham’s skin colour, was probably designed to explain why the Israelites should triumph over the Canaanites, but it was co-opted, as here, in a racist manner to explain why light-skinned Europeans should rule over people with darker skins (Whitford 2017).

We are used now, of course, to critical race theory, and the argument that for race work to occur people of colour do not need to be present, more a chromatic scale that can be applied to peoples, even if it is not directly activated in the particular moment of articulation in question

(Whittaker 2019). Whiteness and pale colours are valued more than blackness, the dark, the former associated with goodness, godliness, and beauty, the latter with badness, evil, and ugliness (Patton 2022). Certainly, Pory notices and thinks about skin colour and, like Best, makes much of the racialized story of Ham.

Which leads to my third point, which is that Pory's understanding of racial identity is intimately intertwined with religion. Skin colour is one factor – which we should note has a Biblical explanation – but religious belief is another, in many ways, more important factor for Pory, but not necessarily later thinkers as “epidermalization” became the dominant mode of imaging the difference between peoples, as I will explain. Al-Wazzan, as Pory makes clear, is a convert, a Moor who has transferred his allegiance from Islam – here called Mohammedanism – to Christianity. The conversion was surely not a free and straightforward one and being a scholarly employee of the Pope it was probably a good choice (assuming al-Wazzan had any choice) (Davies 2008, 56–8). For Pory, al-Wazzan is worth reading because he has become “one of us” and has much to tell English/British readers through his scholarship and former life. And, as Pory points out, we can only learn from al-Wazzan because he was able to escape dangerous situations through the astute deployment of the advantages provided by his identity:

Moreover as touching his exceeding great Travels, had he not at the first beene a More and a Mahumetan in religion, and most skilfull in the languages and customes of the Arabians and Africans, and for the most part travelled in Carovans, or under the authoritie, safe conduct, and commendation of great princes: I marvell much how ever he should have escaped so manie thousands of imminent dangers. (Africanus 1896, I, 6)

Clearly Pory considers racialized identities as malleable, not entirely and irrevocably fixed like skin colour. They are also imagined in terms of a religious identity, that can be manipulated and altered, as al-Wazzan's conversion from Islam to Christianity indicates.

We never learn whether al-Wazzan is, in Pory's classification, a tawny or a black Moor – perhaps that is not all that important – but it is worth noting that Pory sees Africa as a place full of diverse peoples: indeed, as Emily Bartels has pointed out in a brilliant reading of the text, the first Africans are not African at all, but Arabians, an apparent reality that either deracinates land and people or makes Africa like

the island of Britain, especially during the age of migrations when the English settled in the south east and pushed the Britons to the north and the west (Bartels 2008, 144–6; Africanus 2023, introduction, xiv–xxii). So, my final point about the passage is that for al-Wazzan and Pory, Africa is full of different peoples. There are Egyptians, Arabians, outlaws, and two types of Moors, as well as a host of sub-divisions, and the mobility of peoples through caravans, a feature of African life that Pory emphasises, encourages further traffic and intermingling. We later encounter Amazons, cannibals (of course), white Moors and cave-dwellers, Troglodytes, nomads like the Scythians and Tatars, so that Pory's supplement to al-Wazzan's already complicated picture of diverse African identities makes it clear that the continent's peoples can be variously classified on grounds of skin colour, geographical area, and social practices. There are also numerous religions: native idolatry, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

If, on the one hand Pory is a racist who promulgates the story of the curse of Ham, on the other, he has a more complicated and confused sense of identity formation, one that does not depend on a straightforward epidermicist understanding of race. Pory does indeed place great emphasis on skin colour. In lower Ethiopia he states that "the inhabitants are of an olive-colour, and some of them blacke, like unto the nations adjoining, and they go naked from the girdle-stead upward, and speak the Arabian toong" (Africanus 1896, I, 54). In Melinde, the most northerly kingdom of Zanzibar:

The inhabitants (especially on the seacoast) are Moores and Mahumetans: who build their houses very sumptuously after the manner of Europe. They are of a colour inclining to white, and some blacke people they have also among them, which are for the greatest part Idolaters: howbeit all of them pretend a kinde of civilitie both in their apparell, and in the decencie and furniture of their houses. The women are white, and sumptuously attired after the Arabian fashion with cloth of silke. (Africanus 1896, I, 55)

The black people are idolaters, and the implication is that the blacker people are the more idolatrous they are, and that whiteness and civility are interconnected, even if that civility is Islamic, the women whitest and most civilised.

However, what is clear is that Pory sees identity most clearly in terms



of religion and the truth of Christianity, placing the heaviest emphasis on faith. The inhabitants of the Canary Isles are a case in point.

The natural inhabitants of the countrey are of a good disposition, and notable agilitie; but before they were discovered, they were so grosse and rude, as they knewe not the use of fire. They beleevd in one creator of the world, who punished the evill, and rewarded the good; and in this point they all consented, but in other matters they were very different. They had no iron at all, but yet esteemed it much when any came to their hands, for the use thereof. They made no account of gold or silver, judging it a folly to esteem of that mettall, which could not serve for mechanically instruments. Their weapons were stones and staves. They shaved their heads with certaine sharpe stones like to flint. The women would not willingly nurse their owne children, but caused them to be suckled by goates. (Africanus 1896, I, 99–100)

Christianity is not explicitly mentioned here but it is clear that the people, like other “good” natives in various travel accounts, are good because they are convertible, already grasping the rudiments of the faith in the one true God (Burton and Loomba 2007, introduction, 11–13). They may originally be uncivilised, savage even, but they share a fundamental series of beliefs with Europeans and so, the passage implies, will join with them as converts.

Given the ways in which Pory thinks about race, performs racecraft, it may be just as important to look at the structural nature of his ideas as well as seeing them in terms of a linear history in which there is an origin that serves as a foundational moment. As Geraldine Heng has argued, before the Enlightenment race was “a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content” (2011, 268). Racial differences could be imagined in terms of genealogy and inheritance, or in terms of geographical distinctions, which had determined identities (Heng 2018, 24–5). Distinctions could be based on skin colour, and often were, and there was undoubtedly a wealth of prejudice directed by white people against non-white people (Hahn 2001). However, as the words of Pory indicate, European ideas about race were just as firmly centred on religion and conversion as place, inheritance, and pigmentation. Therefore, it is at least arguable that anti-Semitism was a more significant factor in defining late Medieval and sixteenth-century European ideas of racial distinctions than anti-black prejudice, even in countries with a relatively

small Jewish population such as England (Kaplan 2019).<sup>3</sup> However, that balance was to change in the seventeenth century.

### 3. Structural Transformation

In his challenging book, *Apologies to Thucydides*, which explores the structures of history and the need to situate actions within the cultures where they originated, Marshall Sahlins explores the distinctions between types of historical act, specifically, the difference between Napoleon's invasion of Russia and Bobby Thomson's famous homerun in baseball, "the shot heard around the world," that secured the pennant against the odds for the New York Giants on October 3, 1951. Sahlins is being characteristically provocative, not least in choosing an example from baseball, arguably the most American of all modern sports, with the "World Series" contested by exclusively American teams. More significantly, he is trying to explain why what he calls the Polynesian War of the nineteenth century can be read in terms of the dynastic struggle between various islands and cultures in ancient Greece known as the Peloponnesian War, and how this comparison will yield major insights into how societies work and how they change. I cannot do justice to Sahlins intricate and brilliant arguments here but the relevant passage I want to cite explains the difference between two types of historical actors, which is at the heart of his structural mode of reading history:

They are contrasting forms of the structuring of agency. Thomson is a good example of conjunctural agency, Bonaparte of systematic agency.

Bobby Thomson was circumstantially selected for his heroic role by the relationships of a particular historical conjecture; Napoleon's historical powers were prescribed by the office he held in an enduring institutional order. For Thomson, it was the situation alone that allowed him to determine history. The situation put him in a position to make a significant difference, and the situation constituted the significance of the difference he made. Such was the rationality of contingency. But Napoleon's singularity was historically empowered by his supreme position in collective entities—France, the army—that were hierarchically organized precisely to transmit and implement his will (Sahlins 2004, 157).

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<sup>3</sup> The evidence is different in countries such as Spain with a much more significant history of interaction with peoples of colour in Africa and the Americas. See Patton (2022).

According to Sahlins, Bonaparte placed himself in a position to make his agency count in determining the course of history – even though his influence was not quite as he would have hoped or imagined. Thomson did not, but happened to be in the right place at the right time, and got the right ball to hit, contingency elevating him to extraordinary heights for a brief period (although it needs to be acknowledged that he was quite good at baseball, this moment overshadowing a career that was otherwise impressive anyway) (Prager 2008).

So, how do these reflections on contingency, hierarchy, and institutional order help us think about John Pory and his thoughts about race? Using Sahlins's observations as a springboard we might ask to what extent does it help us to understand the history of race and racism and to identify Pory as an originator? Was he someone who inaugurated racial thinking in America? Is that what he was doing in his additions to the translation of *The Geographical Historie of Africa* and then in playing a significant role in the early history of the Virginia colony? Or was he someone trying to make sense of the differences between peoples from inside a confused racist system, his movement across the Atlantic to the Americas little more than a transplantation within an already determined nexus?

Furthermore, should we credit/blame him for his thinking about whiteness, the epidermalization that Craig Koslofsky identifies as the dominant form of racialized discourse emerging at this time, which cast whiteness as the mysterious, indefinable essence of humanity, and blackness as a coloured livery that was a supplement, an extra layer that was put on (2023)? The answer may well lie somewhere between the two positions. Pory, as I have tried to show, understood racial difference that, in line with many of his contemporaries, was based on a wide variety of factors and which placed at its core religion and conversion. But in translating such an important book he undoubtedly was a systematic actor, a Napoleon rather than a contingent Thomson, given that work's huge influence on subsequent generations of English thought about race. As Emily Bartels has pointed out, while al-Wazzan concentrates on local differences and distinctions – even as he generalises about races in places – Pory is far more invested in wider generalisations/distinctions, religion, and skin colour in updating his subject for a new audience in the late 1590s (Bartels 2008, 138–54). Accordingly, Pory provides a link between the Christian mission in Africa and the New World, both in his writing and his actions: “For the Christianizing Pory, on the brink of a new century and an emerging westwardly oriented world,

the consuming focus is Africa's dark side, its idolatrous Negro peoples and its lower domains, which best evidence the need for providential intervention" (Bartels 2008, 152).

#### 4. English/British Empire

So, how should we think about the relationship between the English reading the history of Africa, thinking about race and the subsequent establishment of colonies that formed the first British empire? In 1619, when Pory first went over to Virginia, the English had a few colonies in the Americas, but their possessions were fairly small, and little had been done to establish overseas possessions. Henry VII had famously rejected Columbus's offer to sail westwards in the name of the English crown – although he did sponsor the voyage of the Venetian, John Cabot, who reached Newfoundland in 1497 (Morison 1971, ch. 6). Subsequent English monarchs showed little interest in seriously supporting trans-Atlantic voyages. Others at home argued that there was not much to be gained from such dangerous enterprises, which often resulted in shipwreck and loss of life (Knapp 1987; Hadfield 2019). The Hungarian scholar, Stephen Parmenius (c.1555–1583), perished off Canada in a shipwreck, and his sponsor, the enthusiastic advocate of colonialism, Sir Humphrey Gilbert (c.1539–1583), died later the same expedition when his ship, *The Squirrel*, was overwhelmed in heavy seas near the Azores, with Gilbert crying out: "We are as near to Heaven by sea as by land" (Quinn 2004; Rapple 2004; Snow 2023, 221). The writer Thomas Nashe was notably cynical, arguing that efforts to build up a fleet of small fishing vessels was probably more productive for the English than trying to reach the Americas. In the play, *Eastward Ho!* (1605), by George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston, the advocates of American colonies are satirised in the boastful speeches of the ridiculous Captain Seagull. He claims that reaching Virginia, where wealth and sexual pleasure are abundant, is simple, but after a night's drinking he steers his ship the wrong way in a storm and ends up shipwrecked on the Isle of Dogs in the Thames, which he then imagines is the coast of France (Hadfield 2011; Stevens 2012, 143).

The first English colony was established on Roanoke Island, off the coast of North Carolina, founded in 1585 by Ralph Lane, a notably unpopular, disciplinarian leader (Kupperman 2007, 18, 33). The island appeared to have many advantages, but it was marshy with sandy soil,

and it proved difficult to grow food. Relations with the local natives were fractious – probably because the arrival of the English placed extra pressure on scarce food resources – and the colony was abandoned, although a second voyage left behind a small party to protect the English claim. A second colony was established in 1587, with the artist John White as governor. The colony experienced further difficulties and White returned to England to procure more supplies in 1588. Unable to get back immediately because of the Spanish armada of that year, White eventually returned in 1590 to find the colony abandoned with the mysterious word “CROATOAN” carved into the wooden wall of the fort, which White took to mean that the colonists had left for Croatoan (now Hatteras) Island, but the colonists were never discovered, a mystery that has never been solved (Kupperman 2007, 127–8).

Realising that there was more chance of success on the mainland, with more obvious opportunities to develop the agriculture required to survive, the next, more ambitious and better-planned colony was founded at Jamestown in 1607 (Kupperman 2008). The colony was established on Tsenacommacah, the land of the Powhatan peoples between the mouths of the Potomac and James Rivers on the Eastern shore of what is now the state of Virginia. It endured some terrible years and was on the verge of extinction at various points before it was established as a viable commercial prospect growing and exporting tobacco.

A further colony was established on Bermuda, an archipelago of small islands in the North Atlantic, strategically important but with a fearsome reputation for storms and shipwrecks known as the “Isle of Devils,” as Samuel Purchas noted in his comments on the islands (1906, xix, 13). The islands take their name from the Spanish explorer, Juan de Bermúdez, who discovered the uninhabited archipelago in 1505. However, it was the shipwreck of the *Sea Venture*, an English ship bound for the Virginia colony, in 1609, that led to the British claim to the islands. The episode was widely reported and formed a significant element of the plot of Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, first performed in 1611, which opens with a shipwreck on an un-named island (Kennedy 1971, 54, 62). Many of the crew and passengers, starting to realise that life in Virginia was hard, regulated, and bore little resemblance to the propaganda that had inspired them to leave England, wanted to stay on the islands, which had a plentiful supply of hogs, turtles, and sea-birds, cahows (Bermuda petrels), and which supported a variety of agricultural products – plantains, potatoes, peas, artichokes – as well as the cash crops that were to make colonists rich in the seventeenth

century, cotton, sugar cane and, most important here, tobacco. By 1615 the colony was well established and the islands, also known as the Somers Islands after the captain of the *Sea Venture* who had perished on the island when he returned later the same year, were overseen by the Somers Islands Company until 1685 when it became a crown possession once again (Kennedy 1971, ch. 4).

Bermuda, like Virginia, had a troubled and fractious early history: not, however, because of conflict with natives whose land the settlers had taken, but through internal fighting, resistance to draconian governors, and mutinies, most significantly during the English Civil War when supporters of the king ousted the Parliamentary governor, Thomas Turner, and elected their own representative, John Trimmingham (Kennedy 1971, ch. 13). By 1625 both Virginia and Bermuda had acquired populations of enslaved peoples from Africa and America. As yet these were small populations – the Virginia muster of the colony in 1624 stated that there were 906 Europeans and 21 Africans in the colony; Bermuda's first recorded slaves arrived in 1616 – but were to grow significantly in the seventeenth century as slave societies developed to dominate much of the British Empire (McCartney 2025; Bernhard 1999, ch. 1).

Britons had long traded in slaves, and the naval commander Sir John Hawkins (1532–1595) was proud enough of his involvement to have an image of enslaved Africans emblazoned on his coat of arms (Hall 1995, 20–1). His cousin, another celebrated naval hero, Sir Francis Drake (c.1540–1596), was also a slave trader. At this time the Atlantic slave trade was dominated by the Spanish and Portuguese, who enslaved native Americans and transported enslaved West Africans to Brazil, principally to support the burgeoning sugar plantations. Drake and Hawkins captured slave ships and traded them in Brazil for sugar and treasure: their efforts were an attempt to break into the lucrative Spanish and Portuguese trade, which the Iberian nations dominated until the early seventeenth century (Roper 2017, 69). However, as the British started to establish colonies themselves, they discovered the need for slave labour to go alongside the established practice of indentured servitude (the difference being that indentured servants could eventually liberate themselves when they had worked enough to pay off the fee paid to hire them), the activities of their European rivals helping to provide them with an excuse for their cruelty (Beckles 1989, 3–8). Bermuda and Virginia had small slave populations in 1625, the year in which the British acquired what was effectively their third colony in the Americas, Barbados, an acquisition that was to transform the nature

of their overseas territories, and effectively establish the slave-owning empire (Bennett 2019, 1–2).

As the eminent historian of Barbados Hilary Beckles has stated, the Caribbean Island “for some 300 years now has found itself involved in the most significant trends that have shaped the modern world” (1990, xiii). Barbados is an island in the Lesser Antilles, the archipelago that forms the boundary between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic to the east and has an area of 166 square miles. It was not noted by any of the major Spanish explorers in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, although it was probably sighted, so the first recorded European settler was Captain John Powell, who landed on May 14, 1625, claiming the island for James I (Beckles 1990, 7; Anon. 1741, 3). At that point, Barbados, like Bermuda, was uninhabited, the earlier American inhabitants and settlers having left or died (Hoyos 1978, ch. 1). The island was settled in a subsequent expedition in 1627 led by Powell’s younger brother, Henry. It had a vital strategic importance in the ongoing conflict with Spain, being an easily defensible privateering base enabling the British to harass Spanish shipping (Bennett 2019, 37–8). As in Bermuda, the early history of the colony was characterised by conflict over ownership and faction fighting. Furthermore, as in Bermuda and Virginia, the economy was largely run by planters and indentured servants – there was a recorded population of 10 black enslaved people in 1627, and there were no natives to enslave – until the economic transformation of the middle of the seventeenth century. At first the settlers grew a mixture of tobacco, indigo, and cotton, which sometimes proved profitable and sometimes not, Barbadian tobacco earning a reputation for poor quality compared to that grown in Virginia (Beckles 1990, 13–14).

Barbados’s society and economy was transformed when it was realised that the greatest profit could be made if the island was devoted to the production of sugar. At first planters could make use of indentured labour but, as the Atlantic slave trade increased, prices of slaves came down, and campaigns in England aimed at dissuading servants to seek their futures in Barbados proved effective, and many tried their luck in the American colonies. It now made greatest economic sense to run sugar plantations using enslaved African labour, forcing the slaves to carry out the numerous exhausting tasks required to convert sugar cane into sugar in various usable, commercial forms before the advent of mechanised production. By the later seventeenth century Barbados had become a model plantation society: a tiny white elite of planters overseeing a large population of black slaves producing a cash crop, sugar,

slaves outnumbering white servants by a ratio of 30 to 1 in the 1680s (Hoyos 1978, 44). There were rebellions of white indentured servants, notably in 1634 and 1649, and, later, slave uprisings, the first of which was recorded in 1675 (Hoyos 1978, 34; Beckles 1990, 35–7). Even so, as Beckles has argued, “Barbados emerged in the mid-1640s as perhaps the most attractive colony in the English New World” (Beckles 1990, 13). Known as “Little England” as early as the 1630s, by 1650 Barbados was Britain’s most successful colony, linking the West Indies to the north American continent as parts of the world controlled by Britain (Harlow 1926, 24; Hoyos 1978, 25).

Barbados is central to the history of the British empire in so many ways, transforming a series of colonial outposts into a coherent and connected empire in the Americas. Its mono-cash crop model, which made spectacular profits for investors, was soon imitated, and tried out in other places, including a failed colonial experiment on the African island of Madagascar (Bennett 2019, 140–1). The colony, while owned by the crown from its inception unlike Virginia and Bermuda which were governed by companies before becoming crown territories, was based on a trading model, dependent on the entrepreneurial acumen and success of its governors and settlers. In doing so it replaced and superseded the model of centralised imperial control of the Spanish and Ottoman Empires, leaving responsibility for government to those on the ground. The building block of the empire now became the joint stock chartered company, supported by investors and licensed to govern by the crown, rather than the direct control of the crown itself, with its huge, unwieldy bureaucracy, which inevitably struggled to understand, let alone manage, the territories it purportedly ruled (Brenner 1993, ch. 12). As the Spanish Empire stagnated economically, the British developed and advanced. In the seventeenth century European empires – the French and the Dutch, as well as the British – were local in character, but determined by the conditions of global trade (Garcia-Baquero-Gonzalez 1994, Borah 1970).

As many recent historians have pointed out, the British Empire grew in a haphazard, piecemeal manner, colonial settlements developing in different ways until a particular model became dominant and could be copied – but always reliant upon the interactions of settlers and natives, whatever these might be and however coercive they were (Veevers 2020). The chance arrival on Barbados and the particular conditions on the island, which has an ideal climate for growing sugar, with gentle trade winds, moderate rainfall, and abundant sunshine, proved pivotal



in the development of the early British Empire, which then, through the profits generated as well as the inspirational model for white settlers, stimulated further imperial growth. The first planters imagined that they would use indentured white labour but turned to black slavery when it proved more efficient and profitable (Beckles 1990, 17–19; Menard 2014, chs. 2–3). Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1673) is an account of his successful time there, which provides a detailed map of the island and diagrams of sugar factories and the production process, concluding that the island is a wonderful place to live where serious profits can be made by planters, especially if they combine their landholdings to create larger, more efficient estates (Ligon 1657, 23, 84, 112–7). Ligon recognised the importance of sugar not just in sweetening food but in its preservative qualities, facilitating their transportation. He also praised planter society as godly and goodly disposed, the hard work being done by black slaves, whose bodies were better suited to the hard toil necessary under the tropical sun (Ligon 1657, 90).

The story of British slavery is intimately bound up with the history of Barbados, another reason why its occupation in 1625 is so significant. Two questions must be asked. First, was sugar central to the development of a slave economy or did the concentration on sugar accelerate a process already set in motion? Second, was racism a motivation for slavery or was the export of Africans to the Americas based primarily on economic motives, a case most famously made by Eric Williams (1911–1981), who argued that racism was the product of slavery not its cause (Menard 2014, 87–8; Williams 2022)?

The two questions are inter-related and need to be answered together. It used to be assumed that there was a “sugar revolution” in Barbados and that its inefficient, diverse economy was transformed by the advent of sugar when it replaced tobacco, ginger, indigo, and cotton as the island's staple product. Recent work, however, has demonstrated that there was slavery before sugar and suggested that we should refer to a “sugar boom” rather than a revolution (Menard 2014, 8). Barbados was a relatively rich colony in the 1640s before the advent of sugar but the switch to that crop enabled a social and economic model based on planters and slaves to exceed all possible expectations of growth and monetary success in a relatively short time. In doing so, Barbados transformed sugar production just as sugar production transformed Barbados (Menard 2014, 47–8).

The increase in slaves on the island had other significant conse-

quences. In Britain, especially in London, merchants became ever more eager to invest in the colony, in sugar, and in the slave trade, so that the slave population increased at a much faster rate than that of indentured servants, the colonial economy thriving on the harshest form of economic servitude. A key period was during the English Civil War when city investors, worried about the chaos at home and unable to plough money into the collapsing Brazilian sugar plantations, started to speculate in what seemed like much safer areas with more secure profits, viz., sugar and slavery, stimulating the Barbadian economy and fostering rapid growth. By the 1640s Barbados sugar provided significantly greater returns on money invested than the East India Company, another conspicuously successful imperial venture, and much more than a risky investment in the American colonies (Bennett 2019, 114).

Even though wealth seems not to have been directly transferred to Britain from the colonies, remaining to make the planters stupendously affluent, the colonies generated home demand through the expansion of markets as goods were exported there and inspired innovative techniques and practices that stimulated further production (Menard 2014, 88–9). In the British colonies, Barbadian planters and slaves were important for the development of slave societies in Jamaica, South Carolina, and Virginia, migrating to these territories and bringing with them the knowledge and practices of the sugar plantation (Menard 2014, 109; Hatfield 2007, 162). If we adopt the – admittedly vague – distinctions of Moses Finley, Barbados had been transformed from a society in which there are slaves to a slave society (Finley 1980, 22).

In the process, an ideology of “whiteness” developed with white people assuming superiority over people of colour, imagining that to be white was to be natural and normal, skin colour – epidermalization – imagined as an addition that connoted inferiority.<sup>4</sup> White people were owners; people of colour, slaves. Whiteness was exploited to undermine any form of class solidarity between slaves and indentured servants – a serious fear for the planters – so that distinctions between peoples were based on skin colour more than social hierarchy, rank, or class. The most significant decade for the English slave trade was probably the 1640s, which saw it expand to hitherto unimagined levels. A tried and tested triangular arrangement developed with the Guinea Company (established in 1618), which controlled the African slave trade, transporting people from West Africa to the Caribbean and the American

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<sup>4</sup> See above p. 82.

colonies, then using the same ships to bring sugar and tobacco back to England (Pestana 2007, prologue).

Of course, prejudice based on skin colour was not a new phenomenon, and light-skinned European people had a long history of valuing what was white, bright, and translucent over what was black, dark, and opaque, dating long back to the early Middle Ages (Heng 2018: ch. 4). More recently, in 1596 Queen Elizabeth famously protested to the Lord Mayor of London that “there are of late dive moores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are allready here to manie,” ordering him to deport the offending immigrants (Bartles 2008: 103). The plea was clearly not that successful because in 1601 she repeated her complaint stating that there were “great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm,” who have no understanding of Christ and his gospel. Evidently, not everyone was happy about the diverse nature of the peoples living in Britain around the year 1600.

The pioneering work of Imtiaz Habib, followed by Miranda Kaufmann, has uncovered many black people living in early modern Britain (Habib 2008; Kaufmann 2017). What is also significant is, the queen apart, there was a lack of recorded interest, which might suggest that the English did not always find this black presence especially obnoxious, and something that they needed to confront. As I have already stated, European conceptions of race before the eighteenth century were a complicated and confusing issue.

However, by the middle of the seventeenth century things were definitely changing. Racism was surely a motivation for the enslavement of Africans, a belief that black-skinned people were inferior to their white counterparts and descendants of Noah’s cursed son, Ham, working alongside the desire for territorial expansion, profit, and an easier life. Once slavery became a widespread phenomenon that racism – now the dominant form – accelerated, just as sugar accelerated the development of Barbadian society. The advent of the British Empire as a principally African slave-owning society, rather than a society which owned some slaves, necessitated the ideology of “whiteness” as an indelible mark of superiority to people of darker skins who they enslaved to make the plantations in the Americas work to produce the various cash crops that fuelled the expanding empire. As Russell Menard put it in his history of sugar, “the ideology of whiteness, first built in Barbados, was gradually spread throughout the empire, often carried by Barbadian emigres” (Menard 2014, 120). The British claim to Barbados in 1625

was indeed a crucial event, a pivotal moment not just in the history of the British Empire with the creation of the first slave society in the English-speaking world but in the creation of the divisions that shape the modern globe.

## 5. Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from these interconnected historical moments, the translation of *The History of Africa* into English and the British acquisition of a small Caribbean island? And how might we think of their relationship to Ibram M. Kendi's claim? It is surely a bit too much of a stretch to imagine, with Eric Williams, that racism came after colonialism, and that it was a product of the profitable sugar trade, which lends credence to Kendi's sense that the arrival of slaves and racist ideas at the same time in North America is a significant moment. But it must also be an error simply to follow the thinking of critical race theory at its most basic and argue that the Atlantic slave trade was an inevitable consequence of anti-black prejudice in the Middle Ages (Ramey 2016: 63; Whittaker 2019: 6). Accordingly, it has to be worth following Kendi's claim and trying to find out to what extent Pory's version of Africa played a crucial role in English colonial interventions in the New World and the transformation of the discourse of race from the balanced and contradictory confusion of the late Middle Ages to the epidermal ideology of Christian whiteness that justified the Atlantic slave trade, work that still needs to be done. It is highly unlikely that a smoking gun will emerge, proving a direct link, and it is possible that there is no direct link between the two sides of Pory's colonial life as a translator and an official.

Even so, it would seem counterintuitive to imagine that the relationship between the representation of Africa in Pory's text and the subsequent history of the Middle Passage is simply a coincidence. However, we may need to acknowledge that the search for the specific origin of the story of race and racism may not tell us as much as we would often like to think it will. Rather, it is the moment when ideological beliefs (the inferiority of some peoples) and practical possibilities (the chance of establishing colonies and growing profitable crops) coincided that was truly significant, a fundamental change that enabled historical actors to play their part in transforming the world. The arrival of John Pory in Virginia and the British colonization of Barbados were indeed

important, perhaps pivotal, moments in that history. Was he a Napoleon or a Bobby Thomson? However we answer that question, it is the structural transformation that took place later in the seventeenth century, when the enslavement of African peoples started to make economic sense to British entrepreneurs and a basic colour prejudice became all-encompassing as a result, that things really changed.

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