

Chapter 15: The Marriage of Science and Empire

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind • Yuval Noah Harari

Part 4: Maritime Expansion

1 The Empty Map: Embracing Unknown Territory

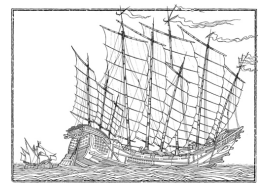
- ✓ Prior to the 15th century, world maps created in China, India, and the Islamic world drew complete coastlines, pretending the entire earth was already charted.
- ✓ European explorers drew maps with vast, honest empty spaces, openly displaying their lack of knowledge and creating an irresistible urge to explore and conquer.
- ✓ The 1507 Waldseemüller map was the first to boldly sketch the outline of a new continent labeled "America," leaving blank ocean expanses that invited scientific expeditions.



The Salviati Map (1525): vast empty expanses honestly admitting geographic ignorance.

2 Why Europe? The Imperial Scientific Mindset

- ✓ In 1750, Western Europe was economically and technologically inferior to the great empires of China, the Ottomans, and Mughal India.
- ✓ Europe conquered the globe because it was the only civilization that systematically fused imperial ambition with scientific curiosity, sending botanists and geologists alongside warships.
- ✓ When British admiral Horatio Nelson fought naval battles, his ships carried scientific observers who mapped ocean currents and cataloged local wildlife for the Royal Society.



Zheng He's flagship vs Columbus's Santa Maria: Asian scale vs European global ambition.

3 Asymmetric Information and Rapid Conquest

- ✓ European empires conquered foreign lands with tiny military forces because they possessed immense information advantages, while native empires had zero intelligence on Europe.
- ✓ When Hernán Cortés landed in Mexico in 1519, the Aztecs had no knowledge of Spain or the Caribbean, allowing a few hundred Spaniards to overthrow an empire of millions.
- ✓ By contrast, European conquerors methodically collected ethnographic, geographic, and military intelligence, deciphering native languages and exploiting tribal rivalries.

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Part 4: Colonial Knowledge & Summary

Part 4: Power & Extinction

4 Academic Colonization: Deciphering the Past for Power

- ✓ European colonial officers did not just plunder wealth; they conducted massive linguistic, historical, and archaeological research that helped them govern conquered populations.
- ✓ British scholars deciphered ancient Persian cuneiform and translated Sanskrit texts like the *Manusmriti*, using the natives' own ancient laws to administer the British Raj.
- ✓ Sir William Jones discovered the Indo-European language family in Calcutta, linking European and Indian languages and turning historical philology into an instrument of administration.

5 The Tragic Extinction Horizon: The Tasmanian Tragedy

- ✓ The combination of scientific curiosity and imperial conquest often resulted in the complete and ruthless annihilation of indigenous cultures and populations.
- ✓ European colonists viewed native hunter-gatherers as living relics of primitive prehistory, systematically driving them off their ancestral hunting grounds.
- ✓ In Tasmania, European settlers wiped out the entire native population within a few decades; when Truganini, the last full-blooded Tasmanian woman, died in 1876, her skeleton was displayed in a museum.



Truganini (c. 1812–1876): tragic symbol of indigenous annihilation under imperial expansion.

Chapter Summary

- ✓ European expansion succeeded because European explorers drew maps with empty spaces, combining an open admission of geographic ignorance with imperial ambition.
- ✓ While Asian empires like China and India focused on consolidating inland borders, European powers systematically integrated scientific research with maritime conquest.
- ✓ Asymmetric information allowed small European expeditions to conquer vast American empires whose leaders had zero knowledge of Europe or global geopolitics.
- ✓ Imperial science weaponized linguistics and archaeology to administer colonial populations, but also drove tragic waves of indigenous dispossession and cultural extinction.