

Prologue

Historical Dynamics of Change

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The opening century of the four hundred years of Atlantic history explored in this volume can be understood historically only in terms of the cards that the entrants into it brought to the table. The hands they held were similar—in fact global—in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The historical dynamics that motivated and enabled the players in all three regions revolved around very long-term struggles among powerful military interests, who thrived by conquest of accessible lands and the populations living on them. Other, commercial, interests were also at play in Afro-Eurasia. Merchants thrived by moving through the surrounding uninhabited spaces—often deserts—and also on the seas and oceans.

The customary perspective on these processes tends to celebrate “civilizations”—expansive “empires” and the luxuries supported by the wealth appropriated through conquests—thus taking militarism and commerce for granted. This volume balances this familiar story with the more local perspectives of small communities in most of Africa and Native America, as well as more of the ordinary villages in Europe and small communities in the Americas. It also historicizes the triumphs of conquest by emphasizing the costs of achieving them, and even more of maintaining them through time. There is nothing stable about history: continuity is fragile and requires effort to achieve.

Taking a very long-term view, the military conquests prominent in the history of Eurasia were costly and destructive and in the long run tended to burn the aggressors out. On this millennial scale, merchants, on the other hand, tended to accumulate wealth in enduring forms and to grow in financial strength. They invested their excess assets in military regimes that were reaching the logistical limits of plundering and in agricultural and other producers, as well as in more remote, and independent, communities. These relatively isolated communities, in turn, extracted commodities of value to visiting traders, and did so—without abandoning their own strategies of mobility, diversity, and mutual obligations—to invest in productive, but immovable and costly, infrastructure.

Militarists and merchants thus drew similarly on resources external to the structured cultural or political domains within which they competed. The balances among the strategies of local communities, merchant commerce, and military conquest varied by region—Africa, the Americas, and Europe—and within each region as well. This prologue sketches specifics of these variations relevant to what motivated European merchants and militarists to venture out into what became a fast-changing Atlantic World. The results everywhere were enabling for some, if also at the expense of others. But these

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initial Atlantic-oriented successes eventually proved overwhelmingly effective, enriching, and empowering, primarily for the partnership of merchants and militarists unique to northwestern Europe.

Backgrounds—Lands, People, and Seas

In the second half of the fifteenth century, the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean became historical spaces exploited by humans as relatively marginal players in Europe nosed their ways west beyond the horizons of coast-hugging maritime transportation networks known since ancient times. From Europe, the strong Canary Current flowing south and then west off the desert shores of northwestern Africa carried mariners sponsored by minor members of Portugal's late-medieval military aristocracy. They probed the barren Saharan coasts in search of fabulous wealth in gold reported to exist in regions beyond the desert, inhabited by people whom Muslims in North Africa distinguished from themselves as "black," a term also differentiating them as enslaveable unbelievers. Mariners seem to have been aware of these ocean winds and currents, and even the mid-Atlantic Azores archipelago, as early as the first half of the fourteenth century. The modern name for what we now see as an ocean, the Atlantic, comes from the eastern Mediterranean perspective of those ancient eras and alludes implicitly to the mysteries of the open sea among European literati: the word is an adjectival Greek form (*atlantikos*) referring to the Atlas Mountains in modern Morocco, thus to the endless waters beyond the Pillars of Hercules (Strait of Gibraltar).

Beyond this fanciful vision of the Atlantic in European-written scholarship, practical mariners and pirates had for centuries ranged widely through the northeastern Atlantic, and a few even out to its closer western shores. Portuguese fishermen are reputed somehow to have crossed the north-flowing Gulf Stream to reach the Grand Banks off modern Newfoundland, where they found greater interest in teeming schools of cod and haddock in the sea itself than in the land or its inhabitants. These northerly latitudes had been well known to Norse mariners, who had settled then-uninhabited Iceland as early as the 800s and in the 900s had reached western Greenland and, at least occasionally, even the North American mainland.

For fourteenth-century Christian Europe, commercial prospects to the east loomed much larger. The sophistication of China became legendary upon Marco Polo's return in 1295 from his venture along Central Asia's Silk Road, under the sponsorship of Kublai Khan (1215–1294). The Christian holy lands in the eastern Mediterranean had even earlier become targets of pious late Middle-Age European chivalry, culminating in the Crusades, a series of intermittent raids and military occupations by European knights between 1096 and 1272. It is no wonder that the ocean initially attracted primarily interests who were relatively marginal within Europe at the time.

The people along the other shores of the Atlantic cared even less about open waters. Western Africans were oriented internally toward interpersonal relationships of obligation and trust and exploited the ocean only in accessible tidal estuaries, shallow bays, and an extensive network of lagoons running east from the mouth of the Volta River (in modern Ghana) through the vast delta of the Niger River and on to modern Cameroon. Their maritime technologies centered on offshore fishing with nets in long canoes, and fishing communities occupied the shores of sheltered inlets and dried their catches to exchange with inland neighbors for grains, tubers, and other products. One shallow bay in Central Africa harbored a distinctive small bivalve with a shell (*nzimbo*) that Kikongo-speaking communities in adjacent inland regions circulated as a kind of

regional currency. Beyond the nearby horizons of these shoreline communities, the reddening sun set over an Atlantic underworld of ancestors, Kalunga in the word of the Kongo. Neither evidence nor apparent historical motivation supports a conjecture, sometimes heard, of ancient African ancestors of the Olmecs in Mesoamerica, and a report of a massive fleet dispatched from Senegambia to the west in the fourteenth century is no less legendary.

Native Americans were similarly landlubbers, although they also harvested the shellfish and crustaceans of the shorelines and dried the salt from sometimes elaborately constructed tidal pans to trade with inlanders. Also like Africans, they found their ways out to islands accessible with their canoes. The rich marine resources of the shallow Caribbean waters, including manatees, sea turtles, and reef fishes, had long ago attracted settlers from the mainland of Central America, the overspill of populations growing around maize agriculture. They had been followed somewhat later by cassava-cultivating arrivals from northern South America, later called Arawaks from a word for the starchy tuber domesticated in Amazonian forests that they cultivated.

These smaller communities of most of Africa and Native America were efficient, in the sense of sustaining themselves at relatively low cost through the vagaries of varying climates and occasional momentary concentrations of individual authority. The low maintenance required of such small communities, and their consequent durability and ubiquity (not only in the Americas and Africa but also throughout the world, including Europe), derived from the flexible coordination that they achieved without the burdens of the permanent infrastructure of coercion. In contrast, the Eurasian strategies of monumental construction and military destruction, although generally understood as “civilization,” came with considerable costs. These very expensive investments are significant historically—that is, in the sense of motivating change—because conquests could be maintained only with often-coerced, and eventually profound, modifications in the lives of the villagers compelled to support the military and ceremonial aristocracies who managed them.

The historical perspective of this volume treats change as a challenge. History is about change, of course, but a historicized account of the Atlantic (or any past) starts from the premise that innovation takes creative effort and resources, that novelty presents challenges for humans to seize as opportunity rather than to resist. Arrangements worked out in the past are the only tools that humans have to draw on to compete for success in the emergent circumstances of the present. They create simplified, highly selective, usually self-interested versions of the past as guidelines used in the present to confront the yawning unknown of an incipient future. History, taking full account of the ephemerality and uncertainties of life, is contingent; outcomes are more accidental than intended.

Understanding the historical Atlantic therefore requires a suspension of the comfortable, optimistic visions that typically construct the European past as progressive. Though civilization in Western societies is based on militarization and material wealth, most Africans and Native Americans lived by less costly standards of achieving and maintaining human community; hence, they were less in need of the external resources of the Atlantic to sustain them. An inclusive, balanced consideration of the regions around the Atlantic in the fifteenth century thus understands the great stone structures; the modest-sized urban concentrations of people in Europe, the Americas, and (less commonly in) Africa; and in particular the horse-based extreme militarization unique to the Eurasian background not only as “dynamic” but also as unstable, costly anomalies sustainable only by constant innovation to reach and absorb ever-more-distant resources. For particular parties on four continents the Atlantic became such a resource, in differing ways.

Europe with Its Back to the Water

The dynamics of military consolidation in Eurasia had revolved for 3,000 years around the vast spaces of the continent's temperate latitudes, from the Ukraine to Mongolia, especially the speed and power of the horses bred there. Horse-based raiding from the steppes had long before spilled southward into densely populated agrarian valleys from the Yellow River to Mesopotamia and eventually the lower Nile. In the millennium following Roman domination masses of mounted invaders had repeatedly punctuated the history of western Europe, raising the military costs of defense to the limits supportable within its relatively confined spaces.

Although the military aristocrats of Europe invested heavily in defensive redoubts—the dramatically perched castles and walled villages atop hills that now attract tourists—they survived by contracting in scale, and they multiplied accordingly in numbers. Christian prohibitions on lending money at interest had favored Jewish merchants as the creditors of choice among Europe's military aristocrats, but merchants in Venice, Florence, and Siena, relatively free of landed military competition, used the wealth generated from Mediterranean commerce to take control of these cities as republics. They were distinctive in Europe in the liquidity that they could mobilize for investment in artisan processing—especially glass in Venice and woolen textiles in Florence—and eventually also in banking and credit for the military aristocrats. The major riverine arteries of central Europe—the Rhone, Rhine, and Danube—similarly supported commercial consolidation of liquid wealth in the hands of the great banking families of the Germanic-speaking areas, not least in the low country around the channels where the Rhine emptied into the North Sea.

Merchants represented potential challenges to military power everywhere in Eurasia. Conquest was cheap, but the costs of consolidating military rule tended to escalate beyond the capacities of the local populations called upon to sustain them. Thus the conquerors' dynastic heirs sustained the initial grandeur paid for through plundering by slipping into debt to merchant bankers. Merchants and bankers, unlike military rulers who supported themselves through destruction of opponents and exploitation of the survivors, accumulated wealth in durable, relatively low-maintenance forms—coins, jewels, transport and storage facilities, and inventories. They then, even more profitably, leveraged these relatively fixed assets by lending against their cash values for higher returns in the future. The formal proscriptions against lending money at interest by Christian authorities in Europe at some level reflected awareness of the long-term promise—and power—of investing capital at interest. Literally with their backs up against the Atlantic coastline, they could not afford the geostrategic division characteristic of parts of Asia—that is, between the military aristocracies ruling over populated territories and merchant networks investing their growing commercial assets in traversing desert wastelands and empty seas.

By the fifteenth century, growing commercial sectors of the European economy were straining the available quantities of the specie that underlay their commercialized transactions. This shortage of monetized bullion was intensified by a persistent drain of silver into the giant Asian world economy, integrated under Islamic law and stretching from Senegal, Andalusia, and eastern Africa's Swahili Coast to Central Asia and the Philippines. European aristocrats competed to acquire and display the spices, silks, and fine porcelains of the East, but they had little of comparable quality to offer in return.

In a pattern to be duplicated later in the Atlantic, Italian merchants found markets for their modest products among the Slavic-speaking agricultural populations along the Adriatic and around the Black Sea, selling their goods to them on credit. Indebted Slav

buyers ended up repaying their Venetian creditors in captives and dependents, mostly girls and women, whom the Italians sold as slaves to service the wealthy merchant households of port cities around the Mediterranean, from Venice to Barcelona. These Slavic-speaking females were gathered in numbers sufficient to provoke public notice. The ethnonym “Slavs” denigrating them, and eventually also males, as outsiders eventually came to refer also to their status as captives, that is, as “slaves” in English and cognate terms in most European languages. Thus captive Slavs, and a few Africans, became visible in the Christian Mediterranean as ethnicized outsiders, not as the legal category of *servus* (for slave) inherited from Roman law.

The legal standing of the enslaved on both Mediterranean shores, Muslim and Christian, was instead largely urban and domestic, in contrast with the later public standing of commercialized slaves as productive assets in the Atlantic. That is, though some captives transited public spaces, the ports and marketplaces, they did so only incidentally as they moved into the private households of the urban families wealthy enough to buy them. Households often acquired them or disposed of them through personal relationships of inheritance or marriage or as donations among friends that did not involve currencies or public markets. Within households they were secluded from monarchical law or the public regulations of other recognized corporate bodies—or “orders” or estates. Under the law of the Catholic Church their masters and mistresses were responsible for their spiritual welfare. Under similar Muslim domestic laws of familial responsibility for persons, slaves were *‘abd*, or similarly beholden to the heads of the households within which they lived. Outside households, governments—primarily the seaport municipalities around the Mediterranean through which captives passed—were involved primarily as buyers and not as regulators. Christian and Muslim authorities alike raided their confessional rivals on the opposing shores of the inland sea for captives and held them for ransoms in cash or employed them for urban services or as galley slaves to move goods through their harbors.

Rural estates could not compete with the prices that prospering households of Mediterranean cities paid for captives. The Christian manors of the medieval Mediterranean, generally too poor to buy enslaveable outsiders or to generate demand for labor in excess of what local populations could offer, therefore made do with the resident peasant labor generally characteristic of Europe. European military aristocrats’ confinement in Eurasia’s western extremity also denied them the access to remote and alien populations that had brought reliable numbers of captives into Muslim domains, from sub-Saharan Africans and Circassians to non-Muslim populations of South Asia and the outlying islands of the Indonesian archipelago. And just as Muslims’ monotheistic community of faith forbade enslaving other believers, so were Christians in western Europe prohibited from enslaving fellow communicants.

The personal politics of monarchical sovereignty in Europe further inhibited slaving. The aspiring Christian monarchs of Europe were seen as benevolent patrons enmeshed in intricate personal relationships of loyalty—lord to liege and on out to villagers living on the estates of the aristocracy—and patronage and protection in return. These mutual responsibilities contrasted with the entirely one-sided power gained in Asia by military conquests. The sovereign authority of monarchy in Europe was thus comprehensive and exclusive within territorially defined domains, and increasingly direct. As fifteenth-century military aristocrats managed slowly to define and implement claims to the singular sovereignty of monarchy, to the exclusion of all competitors for claims on their local populations, they had little room to tolerate the exclusive loyalty to masters that enslavement entailed. Significant retinues of slaves, beyond the reach of monarchical authority, posed potential threats to supreme royal power.

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The royal legal codes in thirteenth-century Europe, from Scandinavia to Iberia, promoted significant assertions of dynastic sovereignty beyond the persons of the kings proclaiming them. These codes only exceptionally recognized competing private rights of individuals over captives. Recruitment of personnel by slaving thus withered away in most of Christian Europe. This was not the case, however, in “Reconquista” Iberia or the independent cities of the Mediterranean. In this context, the increasing commercial, and thus publicly visible, transactions in Slavic-speakers in the fifteenth century prompted creation of the ethnic label that the subsequent distinctively commercialized context of the Atlantic turned into a designation of personal property, and thus a financial asset, with profound consequences for the non-Christians whom Europeans acquired there.

Commerce and Militarization in Africa

The small, flexible communities along the coasts of Africa were relatively self-sufficient. In the interior, communities of traders—pivot points in the extensive regional economies in the northwestern bulge of the continent—had dispersed in diasporas of small settlements linked by their shared Islamic monotheism, literacy employed in contracts and communication over distances, and accompanying Muslim commercial law. With these unifying strategies they moved Saharan salts and other minerals in significant quantities over considerable distances between the desert and the processing and artisan industries of the more populous savanna lands to the south. On their return to the north, the diasporic traders carried grain and other products of the agricultural latitudes, as well as commodities extracted from the margins of the forests beyond, notably oils from the palms and nuts from the kola trees found there.

The dramatically contrasting wet and dry seasons of western Africa shifted in latitudes through century-long (or longer) cycles of droughts, which were transformative in intensity and duration. Cultivators favored mobile, flexible strategies of production. They abandoned plots exhausted through cultivation within a generation or so and opened new ones. In these circumstances, it made no sense to invest in permanent, improved fields. Cultivators also favored similarly adaptable methods of political integration. People lived in small communities, where personal familiarity and multiple ongoing relationships defined by mutual commitments lasted through generations. Local village-centered communities understood themselves in terms of reproduction, using the relevant concepts of kinship—genealogies, generations, and marriage alliances—to exchange fertile women among communities defined by descent.

Significant urban concentrations of artisans, merchants, and groups servicing the traders, some of them stable over centuries, marked the latitude at which the desert traders offloaded their camels and donkeys. The trading diasporas carried on to the south with caravans of men bearing packets of salt and other desert commodities on their heads. The fertile alluvial floodplains of the rivers, which rose and fell annually with the strong concentration of rains in the few months of the summer, supported the larger and more enduring of these cities from the valley of the lower Senegal River in the west, east to Lake Chad (and further east to the Upper Nile). The most enduring were Jenne-Jeno in the vast inland delta, or floodplain, of the northeastward-flowing upper course of the Niger River and Gao on the river’s southeasterly middle course.

The best known of these towns, at least in Europe, were the most northerly outposts, the jumping-off points for the long trek across the desert to Mediterranean markets. An early one, an outpost on the very edge of the Sahara since the tenth century or so, had intercepted Muslim traders arriving from Mediterranean North Africa in search of gold from the headwaters of the Niger and Senegal rivers to the south. The market authority

in charge of monitoring (and taxing) these exchanges loomed as a mighty “king” in the militarized style of Asia and Europe for Muslim traders arriving there, at the limit of their resources in this remote and strange “land of the blacks” (*sudan*, in Arabic). However, in Africans’ terms—to the network of communities harvesting the gold for trade northward in exchange for imported goods, which they distributed through their own local alliances—he was not. This figure, known as the *ghana*, exercised personal authority primarily over the vulnerable visitors from the north. The *ghana*, in effect, quarantined the Muslim outsiders to insulate the southern communities, integrated around distribution and sharing of material wealth, from the greedy material accumulation of the commercial world of the Mediterranean.

The regional trading diasporas, as well as artisan guilds in the towns, extended the intimate language of kinship and descent to keep their distinctive, and thus valuable, specialized knowledge, skills, and contacts to themselves. They dressed, behaved, and spoke in distinguishing ways that highlighted themselves and thus what they had to offer to neighbors who lacked their unique and stylized products and services. They acknowledged the diverse “others” around them with collective ethnonyms, which Europeans learned as they sought partners suitable for doing business. Though Europeans exoticized these characteristics for Africans as “tribal,” these names for the occupational groups in African towns differed little from the similarly ethnicized foreign trading “nations” of towns in Europe.

Distributed and differentiated complementing powers, like the differentiated communities, were characteristic of the political systems of Africa. They were composites, or networks, of the local reproducing communities of kin. However, a centuries-long dry phase in western Africa after about 1100 had dramatically corroded this balance. The desiccation severely distressed the so-called Berbers living in the desert, herders of live-stock—donkeys, horses, camels—and masters of the oases. They rallied around an intense reformist vision of Islam, identifying themselves as *al-murabitun*, or Almoravids, and survived by deploying their horses in a wave of militarization and plundering toward the north, through Morocco, to overrun the southern Iberian peninsula, where they became known as “Moors” (in English, *Moros* in Spanish). In the background of the Christian “Reconquista,” the far-western Mediterranean was a part of the historical dynamics of Africa.

At the same time, south of the desert the militarization brought Sudanic Africa into the Greater Mediterranean sphere of large-scale and continuing warfare. Conflicts in tropical Africa, previously lacking horses, had been fought primarily on a flexible, ad hoc, relatively low-cost, militia-like basis consistent with the dispersed composition of the region’s political systems. But as drought spread in the twelfth century, some of the agricultural communities south of the desert imported horses to save themselves by mobilizing militarily for plunder. In the thirteenth century they extended the range of costly Mediterranean-style cavalry raiding to the populous valley of the upper Niger. The victims of their raiding there defended themselves by rallying behind the banners of mounted warriors of their own, who had adopted Islam to consolidate their connections with the commercial sources of their overwhelming cavalry power in the Islamic north. These warriors of the resulting so-called “Mali empire”—more likely a highly contested military composite—paid for their mounts with the gold that, by the fourteenth century, made the region truly legendary, even among Christians, and in the following century drew the Portuguese south along Africa’s Atlantic coastline.

But the costs of the escalating militarization eventually exceeded the gold available to pay for the imports, and the horsemen of the western Sudan covered the deficits in their balance of trade with the Mediterranean by deploying the speed, range, and force of their

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mounts to raid for captives, whom they sold to their North African creditors. They justified this slaving as pious Muslims defending their faith against infidels, thus confirming under Islamic law their possession of the captives they seized and sold. Traders, also cultivating their Muslim commercial contacts, followed in their wake, moving south into the forests beyond the savanna-bound range of the horses. There they worked with Akan-speaking populations to exploit gold-bearing strata exposed along river banks. These Akan mining communities became the sources for the Portuguese of the precious metal toward the later fifteenth century, fortifying a promontory west of the Volta River's mouth as a trading castle called São Jorge da Mina ("the mine"), or Elmina.

To the east and south of the Volta ran a series of lagoons and the intricate deltaic channels through which the Niger River seeped into the Gulf of Guinea. One defensive reaction in this area to the militarization of the savanna was a more permanently structured military regime there known as Benin. Benin was a populous forested area filled with refugees from the cavalry assaults of the savannas, as well as a center of textile weaving. Beyond the Niger Delta a thousand miles of densely forested and lightly populated coast eventually gave way to more open terrain near the estuary of the Zaire (later Congo) River, beyond the equator. In the highlands south of the river a network of regional chiefs connected the coast to the vast forested basin of the river in the interior. The Portuguese later recognized this network, a political composite of the sort characteristic of most of Africa, by the title of the official charged with representing it to outsiders, and thus to them: the *mani* (master) Kongo.

This Kongo network distributed copper (the prestige metal of Africa) from local sources, the *nzimbo* shells from Luanda Bay and salt from adjacent coastal pans, and elaborate textiles woven from dyed fibers of the raffia palm growing on the fringes of the equatorial forest in the interior. The local communities composing the network competed among themselves—probably not always peacefully—for the lucrative right to represent the network to external contacts. Unlike Benin, the regime was not militarized, though it could mobilize local militia if challenged by outsiders or to contest the succession to the position of the *mani* Kongo. African composite polities like the Kongo network were not dissimilar to the early monarchies of Europe in their moderate degrees of effective political centralization.

Militarization by Terror in Mesoamerica

The Native peoples of the Atlantic seaboard of both North and South America resembled Africans in their separation and dispersal of specific responsibilities for the welfare of their communities. Neither recognized power as singular, or inhering in individuals, and thus inherently competitive. To the extent that individuals held sway, they acted as custodians of specified kinds of expertise, imbued with powers attributed to distinct, abstract, "spiritualized" forms: ancestors, spirits of localized resources, the rains, techniques of healing and hunting, valor in conflict, and other differentiated powers. Authority in each sphere, rather than dominating, contributed to the whole and in turn depended on the complementing specialized powers of others.

Also like Africans, they devoted themselves primarily to reproduction, managing marriages among neighboring groups and raiding more remote communities for women and children when reproduction failed. In times of widespread crisis, great warriors or healers seemingly successful in overcoming the tensions arising from hard times might achieve personal recognition among large numbers of grateful local groups. These prophet-like leaders—really, healers of community discord—might also leave enduring legacies that, in localities favored by rich resources and riverine transport, the survivors honored and

sustained with tombs of sizes impressive even by European standards. In temperate woodlands these monuments appeared as earthen mounds; in rocky deserts and mountains, appreciative heirs assembled stones in layers built on the rubble of earlier monuments honoring previous leaders. The resulting pyramidal forms sometimes grew to truly imposing proportions, even though they were atypical and undoubtedly costly to sustain. The Maya of the many regimes in the Yucatán, for instance, elevated fierce dedication to military valor and manipulation of mighty cosmic forces to noted extremes of monumental expression in the soft limestone of the peninsula.

In Mesoamerica in about the thirteenth century, warriors from the northern deserts had entered the fertile and populous valley of what is now central Mexico, by then heir to a tradition of grandiose stone monumentality. These Mexica warriors gradually made places for themselves as mercenaries in continuing struggles among the valley's paramount chieftaincies—networks of communities recognizing a single chief for such collective interests as war—and militarized the area. After a century or so, their heirs emerged as more or less equal partners, charged with the military aspects of the partnership, in a composite polity formed with the two surviving regional regimes. During a period of severe drought and starvation after 1446, a Mexica chief claimed power independent of, and superior to, the representatives of the two local regimes. A return of the rains in 1455 seemed to confirm his powers after a frenzy of human sacrifices to beseech the war gods of the Mexica.

The resulting Aztec military regime aimed to maintain the power of the moment despite the fact that the crisis it had seemed to divert had faded. The inhabitants of the valley, without a life-threatening predicament to motivate them, had no immediate reason to meet the enormous demands for human lives, wealth, and labor to support the Aztec authorities' grandiose displays of superiority. The Aztecs, like the military regimes of Eurasia, faced the dilemmas of consolidating the gains of conquest, or maintaining loyalties conceded in moments of acute distress, by erecting imposing edifices, ideological indoctrination through continued brutality (including human sacrifices), and intensified demands for tribute and labor. The costs of maintaining permanently armed polities were high, in the long run unsustainably so.

These strategies of political consolidation by violence differed principally in their cultural idioms from the no less demanding military regimes of contemporaneous Asia and Sudanic western Africa. Though the mounted warlords in Afro-Eurasia could assert their power with the speed and force deliverable astride a horse, in the Americas the absence of horses placed the burden of dominating on daunting—indeed terrifying—displays of wanton cruelty. The subsequently legendary Spanish stories of beating hearts plucked from sacrificial victims placed atop pyramids testify not only to the enormous political power of terrorism but also to the extremes required to transcend the limits of the loyalty that local populations were willing to cede to warrior outsiders. The brittleness of Aztec power among the populations of the central valley seems evident also in the massive effort demanded of them to build a relatively siege-proof citadel, Tenochtitlán, on an island in the large lake in the valley floor. This complex of temples was accessible only by a single, defensible causeway, and the population clustered there could be fed only with hyper-intensive cultivation of artificial (“floating”) gardens. The sort of grandeur usually acclaimed as “imperial” had its price.

Like their Afro-Eurasian counterparts, the Aztec chief-priests—in effect warlords—also undertook expansive military campaigns to obtain the plunder, and population, needed to sustain so costly a form of forceful overrule. They reduced local communities, otherwise integrated around reproduction and descent, to regimented tribute-paying wards, and they stationed warriors to occupy and intimidate the more remote territories

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conquered. By the late sixteenth century, they had reached both the Pacific and Gulf coasts, where the Spaniards just then exploring the area learned of them. Although a failed military campaign had revealed the probable overextension of this systematic violence as early as 1481, Montezuma, the able warleader who eventually met Hernán Cortés, had regained the military momentum. However, the tenuousness of the regime remained apparent in its inability to subdue large valley populations, even ones near the central valley, such as Tlaxcala, who joined Cortés to assault their overlords at Tenochtitlán.

The Atlantic thus appeared as an opportunity to actors pressured by the growing costs of militarization on all continents—Africa, the Americas, and not least in Europe, where competing warlords were converting the explosive force of the Chinese mixture of charcoal, sulfur, and potassium nitrate from spectacle to munitions. Although the long history of uneasy partnerships between military rulers and merchant venturers in Eurasia had settled into an array of shifting balances in their competing claims to local populations, merchants as a group there had gained on the military regimes. Militarism was expensive and destructive. Victorious conquerors paid for their conquests with the booty they seized but left their successors with the considerable costs of occupation. In contrast, merchants accumulated assets in enduring forms—inventories, transport equipment, specie, and debt—and leveraged them by providing goods or services on credit to support or obligate suppliers, including outlying communities. Merchants in Europe needed only specie to join in financing the military costs of the monarchies on its maritime fringe, in varying opportunistic partnerships with interests in Africa and the Americas who had their own local reasons for seeing them as opportunities. The Atlantic, as it turned out in the following four centuries, provided the precious metals needed, in quantities that proved catalytic in the changes they financed all around the Atlantic.