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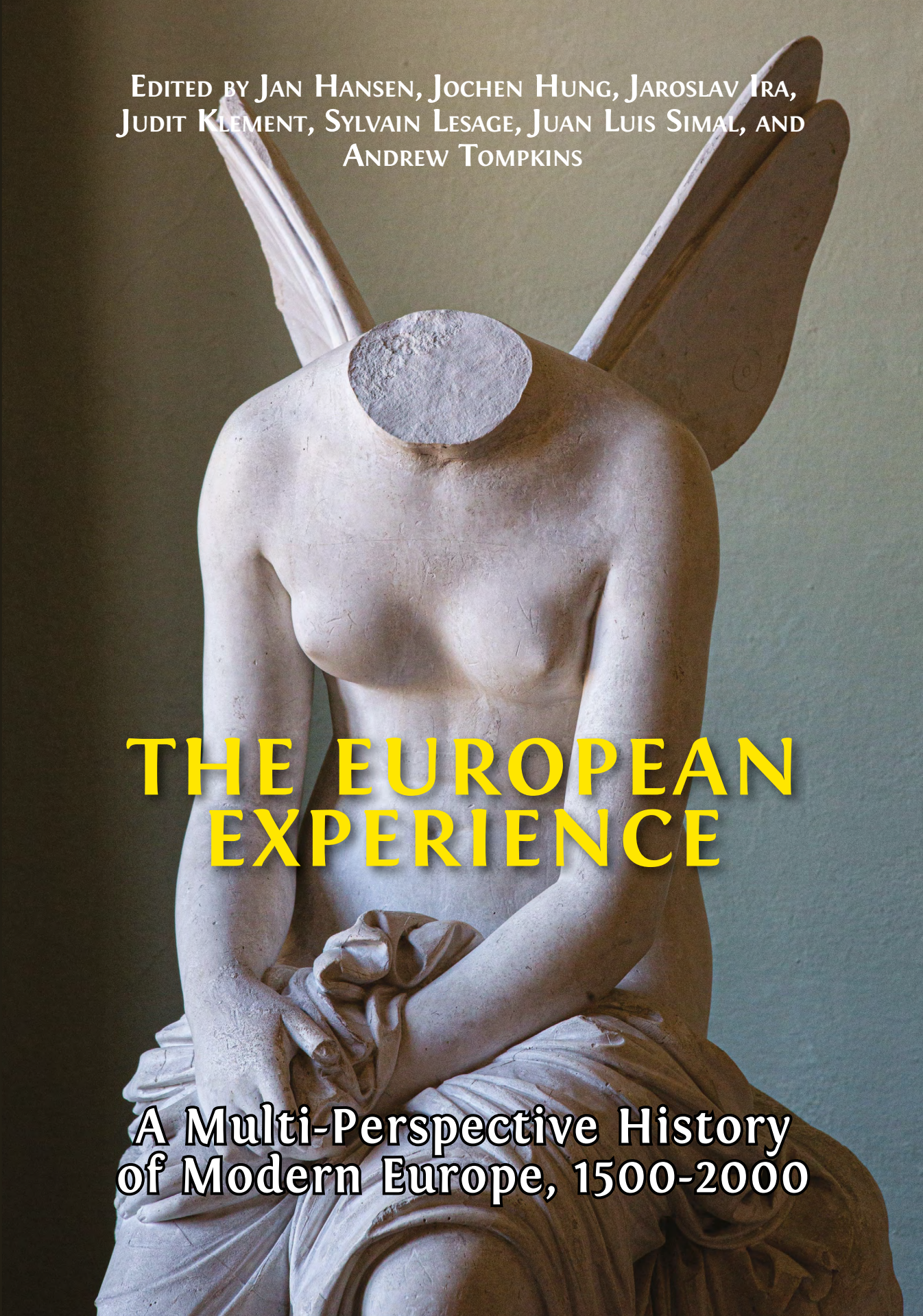

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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1.4.1 Europe's Other(ed)s: The Americas, Africa, Asia, and Middle East in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Saúl Martínez Bermejo, Ramachandra Byrappa, Tobias P. Graf, and Markéta Křížová

Introduction

In the Middle Ages, as the Roman Empire receded into the past, the Catholic Church took over as a major force for European integration. But by the end of this period, Europe's centre of commercial gravity was gradually shifting northwards from the Mediterranean system to the Hanseatic system—from a civilisational 'lake' around which peoples, ideas and products circulated, to the mercantile 'lake' of the Baltic Sea. In the fifteenth century, Ottoman expansion in the eastern Mediterranean further affected the commercial activity of Venice and Genoa, setting them on a path of terminal decline. This prompted a number of 'experiments' in Atlantic exploration, based on Genoese seafaring knowledge and led by the Portuguese. Atlantic navigation in the fifteenth century led to an intense pursuit of military conquest and conflict on the west coast of Africa, the Canary Islands, and the Azores. On the Atlantic frontier of both the Mediterranean and Hanseatic systems sat two seemingly peripheral territories: the Iberian Peninsula, which spearheaded European expansion in the sixteenth century, somewhat unexpectedly; and Britain, which had become the dominant maritime power by the late eighteenth century.

Between 1450 and 1800, direct knowledge about the multiple parts and peoples of the globe was continuously expanding through exploration, trade, and military confrontations. Merchants, missionaries, and mercenaries

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brought home with them their early impressions of the wider world. Numerous contemporary chronicles, maps, atlases, and travel accounts were published throughout this period. These sources of new information were complemented by drawings, engravings, diaries, and letters. In this respect, the introduction of the printing press was of tremendous importance in accelerating the dissemination of knowledge about the world. However, interpreting the knowledge that early modern Europeans produced about the 'others'—the societies they encountered beyond the borders of the world previously known to them—is a particularly complicated task. While all these sources contributed to widening Europe's understanding of the world, they do not provide a straightforward reflection of the environment, physical appearance, economic activities, social structure, and religious practices of the peoples described. Historical documents are replete with information about the ways in which Europeans perceived what they encountered, but these ethnographical descriptions were, in various ways, structured and distorted according to existing mentalities and cultural frameworks.

Religious beliefs were key to defining the 'others'—usually identified as pagans or infidels—because these were the terms by which Europeans primarily expressed their identity. Geographical, political, and cultural frameworks were of secondary importance. In describing the 'other', Europeans often resorted to gradation to explain the diversity of populations and customs encountered. Thus, specific areas or human groups were considered more or less irreligious, and more or less barbarian, when compared with other parts of the world. A particularly influential hierarchy of non-Christian others was produced by the Spanish missionary José de Acosta (1540–1600), who divided non-European barbarians into three types. According to Acosta, the Chinese were similar to ancient Greeks and Romans in that they lived within clear political structures and possessed a written culture. The Incas (in Peru) and Aztecs (in Mexico) also had powerful monarchies but lacked a system of writing. Finally, a large third group contained all those who had 'no law' (a term that also included religion), and who lacked political structures and fixed settlements. Explicitly or implicitly, Europeans often produced this kind of gradation to order the others, and to justify plans for religious evangelisation and the destruction of local customs.

Perceptions are not merely accidental. They are important because of the role they play in helping to create elaborate systems of prejudice with real economic, political, and social consequences. The poor living conditions in Europe sometimes fostered paradisiac mirror images of extra-European lands, while the notion of 'discovery' enabled the introduction and manipulation of hierarchical structures by Europeans, for example to concoct claims of dominion over faraway lands and peoples.

European Models of 'Otherness'

Two forms of pre-existing knowledge were particularly important for Europeans trying to make sense of new environments beyond their own continent. Firstly, they often used the everyday experiences of their own customs, ways of speaking, social hierarchies, foods, animals, and so on, to compare themselves to others. The Spanish chronicler Fernando González de Oviedo (1478–1557), for instance, compared American avocados to European pears. Second, they relied on literary sources. The Bible provided what was regarded as the authoritative account of the creation of the world and the spread of human groups around the planet. Holy scripture provided a surprisingly flexible framework for integrating the various peoples and communities encountered by Europeans into pre-existing worldviews and assigning them a place in wider human history. Following the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453, for instance, the military success of their empire was increasingly interpreted in eschatological terms as divine punishment and a harbinger of the approaching apocalypse. In no small way, this interpretation contributed to the development of the theological positions associated with the Reformation and the resulting split of European Christianity.

In dealing with other parts of the world, Europeans also drew on classical sources describing geographical areas far away from the Mediterranean. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (385–323 BC) spoke about extreme climatic zones and a middle area where civilisation flourished; the Roman author Pliny (23/24–79) described fabulous races, including dog-headed humans; the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (484–425 BC) produced enduring depictions of external barbarians; and the Greek mathematician Ptolemy (100–170) modelled geographical concepts on the shape and size of the world. Many other formal and informal modes of knowledge undergirded the frameworks within which Europeans were able to see, compare and talk about the worlds of others. Fictional prose was sometimes used, too. The Spanish soldier Bernal Diaz del Castillo (1492–1584) referred to the imagined cities described in the well-known medieval chivalry novel *Amadís de Gaula* when he tried to communicate the awe he experienced in his first encounter with the city of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire in today's Mexico City. As shown by these examples, new information was often arranged through comparisons and filtered through previous experiences in order to make sense of the world. But at the same time, this expanding body of factual knowledge, alongside first-hand experiences of new worlds and new peoples, altogether had a critical impact on established systems of European thought, engendering new intellectual classifications and new methods of observing and analysing natural phenomena.

Although multidirectional contacts proliferated between many different regions of the world during this period, it was the American continent that Europeans found particularly alien in relation to their existing frameworks. This feeling of surprise and astonishment, together with the intellectual impact produced by the materialisation—in European eyes—of an entirely new continent, populated by human beings previously unmentioned in classical and medieval sources, is not comparable to encounters with other parts of the globe. Since antiquity, Europeans had cultivated knowledge of Africa, extending far beyond the southern shores of the Mediterranean, even if it was incomplete and distorted. Interaction with different parts of Asia dated back millennia. The fifth, 'austral' continent was hypothesised and imagined well before Europeans had established regular contact with Oceania in the eighteenth century, meaning it did not provoke a shock comparable to the 'apparition' of America in the European imagination.

Complexities and Ambivalences

The title of this chapter refers to the process of constructing boundaries and defining the external. *The other*, therefore, is not a fixed category but rather a malleable and complex relationship which could be invoked in various ways at different times, and for different ends. Accordingly, the appreciation of 'others' in European sources was very unstable, undergoing marked shifts in accordance with the motives and interests of the authors in question, the areas they described, the scale of their descriptions (from very local to extremely general views), the media and channels of dissemination, and the contexts in which such descriptions were produced.

The Ottoman Empire, early modern Europe's nearest other and, with its extensive territories in South-Eastern and Central Europe, a major actor in the continent's history, is a case in point. From the fourteenth century to the mid-eighteenth, the Ottomans presented a formidable military challenge, conquering, among others, large parts of the Kingdom of Hungary. In contrast to the majority of its population, the empire's ruling elite was Muslim, meaning that Christian Europeans viewed them as both military and religious adversaries. At the same time, European travellers, diplomats, military thinkers, and even political theorists like the French Jean Bodin (1530–1596), frequently admired the social, political, and administrative organisation of the Ottoman Empire as well as its military discipline. Many European polities maintained peaceful relations with the Ottomans or even forged alliances with them. The kings of France famously did so in the sixteenth century in an attempt to curb the power of Europe's other powerful dynasty, the House of Habsburg. By the turn of the eighteenth century, the fear and awe that had dominated European

conceptions of the Ottoman Empire were increasingly replaced by mockery and contempt, especially as the balance of military success began to shift in favour of the Austrian Habsburgs, especially with the failed Ottoman siege of Vienna of 1683 and the Ottoman-Russian conflicts in the second half of the eighteenth century. For many Enlightenment thinkers, such as the French political philosopher Montesquieu (1689–1755), the Ottoman sultans became the embodiment of 'oriental despotism'. On the other hand, the eighteenth century also witnessed an explosion of Turcophilia in arts, music, theatre, and fashion. Therefore the only consistent feature of European attitudes towards the Ottomans was, arguably, their ambivalence.

In contrast, early modern Europeans produced particularly positive accounts of the Chinese civilisation, including its technical development (waterways, means of transport); technological innovations (print, paper, gunpowder); a developed urban culture; written culture and a strong literary tradition; social hierarchisation; luxury and refinement—all existing under a stable and highly centralised imperial structure. Chinese religious ideas were usually contested and criticised, however. This generally positive image disappeared rather quickly during the nineteenth century.

Europe's perception of Safavid Persia went through similar changes. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while commercial contacts expanded, ruins of ancient and biblical origins located in Persia were described by European travellers and missionaries with some enthusiasm. Positive attitudes towards the Safavids were built to no small extent on common enmity with the Ottomans. These two Middle Eastern powers had been locked in an imperial rivalry since the emergence of the Safavid dynasty in the early sixteenth century. Much like the conflict between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman-Safavid conflict had a strong religious dimension, as the Ottomans fashioned a distinctly Sunni Muslim identity for themselves, while the Safavids embraced Shi'ism. As recent research has shown, this religious rift within the Muslim community, which goes back to the first century of Islam and continues to influence modern geopolitics, was significantly amplified and institutionalised by the Ottoman-Safavid conflict. European observers were well aware of this distinction, if not necessarily its exact foundations. When the Safavid dynasty began to crumble in the eighteenth century, however, Europeans increasingly characterised it as decadent, linking their account to earlier descriptions of the ancient ruins that European travellers had encountered in Iran.

While wealth, splendour, and sophistication of court environments like those of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals won the praise and admiration of Europeans, positive attitudes towards the first indigenous populations encountered on the shores of the American continent focused instead on paradisiac images of beautiful and innocent humans; such instances are found

in the diaries of the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), and the letter to Manuel I of Portugal sent by Pêro Vaz de Caminha (c. 1450–1500), notary of the expedition led to Brazil by the Portuguese commander Pedro Álvares Cabral (1467/1468–1520). The French philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) famously described the indigenous people as virtuous and 'noble savages', comparing descriptions of ritual cannibalism in Brazil to the barbarous torture of religious opponents in sixteenth-century France. But depictions of indigenous people in the Americas were not always favourable. Descriptions of the elaborate Inca and Aztec civilisations and their court ceremonial blend an appreciation of certain aspects of those cultures with a more general sense of suspicion and harsh critiques of their religious rites. Missionaries hoping to bring Christianity to these newly 'discovered' peoples often commented negatively on what they considered to be their resilient paganism in the face of the 'true religion' as well as their 'inherent evilness' (which often encoded negative images of sexual practices). Descriptions of the natural environment—landscape, climate, and animals—either reinforced the paradisiac stereotypes or stressed the idea of wilderness in the Americas.

Power and 'Otherness'

European descriptions and ideas of non-European 'others' were the product of real-life interaction, conquest, colonisation, trade, exploitation, and military confrontation. But these perceptions and debates also determined how these human groups were treated and the kinds of relationships that Europeans established with them. In numerous areas of the world, Europeans were not able to disrupt completely the previous social and political structures, and acted for many decades as participants and go-betweens within existing economic and political systems, whose rules they themselves had not established. But in other parts of the world, particularly in the Americas and through the enslavement of African populations, disruption was substantial and lethal. The American population was decimated by Eurasian diseases such as smallpox, measles and many others. Partly to replace these population losses, around 8.6 million enslaved people from different parts of the African continent were forced to work on plantations in the Americas between 1500 and 1800.

There were intense theological, moral, and juridical debates about the status and nature of human beings throughout the early modern period. In the Spanish dominions, forceful denunciations of the ill-treatment of indigenous peoples in the Americas sometimes prompted new laws and measures aimed at regulating and controlling these abuses. The theologian and jurist Francisco de Vitoria (1483–1546) rebutted most of the legal arguments, as well as papal donations and imperial ideologies, which supported the Spanish claims

to dominion of the American lands. In 1550–1551, the Dominican friar and Bishop of Chiapas (Mexico), Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), held a famous debate in Valladolid, Spain, with the rival theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494–1573) about the nature of the 'Indians'. Sepúlveda notably pointed to Aristotelian writings to defend the idea of the natural servitude or slavery of Amerindians and to underline their inferiority. Las Casas argued for their human nature and highlighted their capacity for rational thought. While legal concepts and regulations governing the rights and treatment of Amerindians grew more sophisticated, abuses continued to take place throughout the period, along with continuously evolving forms of exploitation.

Slavery, known to Europe at least since antiquity and, to different degrees, present in many regions of the world, reached its frightful apex during the early modern era with the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. Reaching its highest intensity during the eighteenth century and continuing well into the nineteenth, the forced migration of Africans to the Americas and the Caribbean did not only change the demography of these regions, it also provided the backdrop for the systematic development of racism and discrimination on the basis of skin colour. It is here that modern categories of 'black' and 'white' had their origins. The initial decision to ship African labour to the Americas, however, had much less to do with perceived racial inferiority than the realisation that Africans were more resistant to New World diseases than Europeans, while also having immunity to Old World illnesses such as smallpox. Slave owners also considered Africans better suited to the labour regime of plantations, on the basis of agricultural practices that were prevalent in the latter's home communities.

Conclusion

In the early modern period, European awareness of other parts of the globe, their geography, inhabitants, flora, and fauna expanded massively. In trying to make sense of these 'discoveries', Europeans could draw on a significant body of knowledge about the world contained in the Bible as well as the writings of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Pliny. Thus, the militarily successful Ottoman 'Turks' could be equated to the Biblical Gog and Magog, who hailed the end of the world, while indigenous peoples of the Americas could be approached as representatives of the 'Golden Age' of which the Roman poets had dreamed. But attempts to understand new human communities using the frameworks provided by these texts enabled Europeans to assemble the 'other' into their pre-existing worldviews. They also provided Europeans with a means for structuring relations with these new places and peoples, including the need to justify the exercise of power over them.

However, relationships between Europeans and their 'others' were not static. Over time, conceptions shifted in accordance with new information and diverging interests. The changing attitudes of the Spanish writer Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566) towards the enslavement of indigenous people and Africans is a case in point: starting out as the owner of several Taíno slaves on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), he came to oppose the enslavement of indigenous people, advocating instead for the transportation of African slaves to address labour shortages; eventually he also rejected the enslavement of Africans as 'un-Christian'. Where Europeans faced politically and militarily stronger 'others' such as in South Asia and the Ottoman Empire, changing definitions of *otherness* played an important part in creating a mirror image of *Europeanness.* It is no coincidence that historians have traced the emergence of a European sense of identity—that is, a geographical identity as opposed to a religious one—back to the responses of European leaders such as Pope Pius II (r. 1458–1461) to Ottoman expansion in Asia Minor and south-eastern Europe. Concepts of otherness were often employed to create boundaries between groups, but there were many other interactions and exchanges—political, commercial, cultural, and sexual—that were just as common as relations of enmity and adversity. These, too, played an important part in how Europeans continually reconceptualised their 'others' in the early modern period.

Discussion questions

1. Are there any similarities or differences in how early modern Europeans imagined other parts of the world?
2. What role did religion play in these images?
3. Do these images still influence our view of the world? And if so, why?

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