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Mapping Empires

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The Challenges of Mapping the New World

The new world was a competitive piece of land for the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English, who all aimed to colonize and expand their empires. When securing the New World, colonizers faced challenges such as relations with Native Americans, illness, water conditions, and establishment of colonies. In setting out to document and claim the New World for England Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Knight, and Captain John Smith both faced these hardships and challenges in their expeditions, but only Smith succeeded in his goals. Sir Humphrey Gilbert's expedition to the New World was a failure, as the vast majority of his progress was lost in his expedition, whereas John Smith succeeded in his goal of documenting the Chesapeake and his work is still surviving today.

In the Sixteenth century Spain and France started to explore and claim parts of North America, and left the English empire as the final empire to colonize North America. In 1578, Sir Humphrey Gilbert was granted a charter by Queen Elizabeth, after which he had a voyage to plant a colony that ended unsuccessfully and depleted his funds for any further attempts. To regain some of his funds Gilbert served in Ireland and planned a new expedition and ways to gain investors.¹ To gain more funds Sir Humphrey Gilbert hired the cartographer John Dee, merchant and maps collector Michael Lok, navigator Simao Fernandes, and writer Richard Hakluyt.²

¹ Edward Haies. "Sir Humphrey Gilbert's Voyage To Newfoundland," Internet history sourcebooks. Fordham University. Accessed December 3, 2022. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1585haies-gilbert.asp>.

² Nate Probasco, "Cartography as a Tool of Colonization: Sir Humphrey Gilbert's 1583 Voyage to North America.," *Renaissance Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2014): 427.

Gilbert and his team produced estimative maps of the territory Norumbega (the North-Eastern United States) to gain public attention and funding for their trip. Gilbert and his men used French, Spanish, and Portuguese sources to create estimative maps that showed the land they planned to claim.³ In the creation of these maps John Dee claimed Norumbega as land for colonization for the English Empire, and left any unknown land marked as terra nullius.⁴ Given that these maps were in support of claiming land for the English Empire, and Gilbert promised large amounts of land to Queen Elizabeth and his sponsors, he gained enough sponsorship to begin his expedition to Norumbega.⁵

After three years of extensive planning, and a patent that was set to expire within two years, Sir Humphrey Gilbert was ready to set off to Norumbega. Gilbert's goals in his expedition were to establish a colony and claim land for England, create accurate maps and documentations of Norumbega, and eventually send men back to report the findings of the expedition. The expedition departed on June 11, 1583, with a crew of 260 and five ships. The expedition faced a major loss on June 19th when the barque Raleigh (the largest ship of the expedition) took refuge at Plymouth due to the majority of its crew falling ill.⁶ Despite this loss, the expedition continued onward with its original goals.

Upon his fleets' move into uncharted Norumbega territory, Sir Humphrey Gilbert successfully claimed possession of numerous lands for the English empire and his sponsors.⁷ This era also included the discovery of peoples, animals, and plants native to the land. Gilbert's crew encountered Native Americans who were "altogether harmless" and they were even able to

³ Probasco, "Cartography as a Tool of Colonization," 431.

⁴ Ibid, 433.

⁵ Ibid, 427-428.

⁶ Edward Haies. "Sir Humphrey Gilbert's Voyage To Newfoundland," Internet history sourcebooks. Fordham University. Accessed December 3, 2022. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1585haies-gilbert.asp>.

⁷ Haies, "Sir Humphrey Gilbert's Voyage To Newfoundland."

conduct trade.⁸ Gilbert's expedition discovered soil that was suitable for growth and the potential industries of plants such as flax, hemp, corn. Additionally, tree-based goods such as resin, sap, turpentine, timber, and tar were plentifully found.⁹ Gilbert's discoveries and his claims of land were all good signs for potential colonization, as trade and farming could easily be established.

Three months into the expedition, on August 20, 1583 Sir Humphrey Gilbert and his remaining crew began their journey back to England with the ships the *Delight*, the *Golden Hind*, and the *Squirrel*.¹⁰ On August 29, the ships faced storms and the entire crew (approx. 100) and inventory of the *Delight* were lost when it became shipwrecked. The *Delight* lost the majority of Gilbert's crew including a Hungarian scholar who recorded the venture in Latin, a Saxon warrior, and ship captain Maurice Brown.¹¹ The storm continued for days, in which Sir Humphrey Gilbert directed the *Golden Hind* and the *Squirrel* to continue towards their homeland, despite the storm. On Monday, September 9, the *Squirrel* suddenly sank into the sea, losing the lives of Sir Humphrey Gilbert and his crew aboard that ship.¹² Sir Humphrey Gilbert's expedition was a failure due to the loss of the vast majority of documentation, maps, and his crew. The *Golden Hind* was the only ship that made it back to Gilbert's homeland of England, with a crew scarred by their experience and unwilling to return to the New World.¹³ Documentor Edward Haies' surviving first-hand records of Sir Humphrey Gilbert's voyage cements his legacy as an unsuccessful colonizer and documents the complete loss of progress on their journey home.

About twenty years after Sir Humphrey Gilbert's failed expedition, came John Smith's journey to the Americas and eventual voyages and mapping of the Chesapeake.¹⁴ In May of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John Smith, *The Journals of Captain John Smith* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2007), 1.

1606, John Smith came to Virginia and helped establish the colony of Jamestown, where he negotiated with tribes due to his knowledge of the Algonquian language.¹⁵ In December of 1608, (now) Captain John Smith and a few men traveled the Chickahominy River, where Smith was taken hostage by the Powhatan tribe and his men were slain.¹⁶ Smith was captured from about December 10, 1607 to January 1, 1608 and in this time Smith was continuously being moved around, which left him disoriented and with a poor sense of time passage.¹⁷ Through this time, Smith was able to gather valuable information about nearby Native American tribes, lands, and river systems by talking to his captors. Eventually Smith was set to be executed in a ritual, and (according to him) the young daughter of King Powhatan, Pocahontas, prevented his execution. After Smith was spared, King Powhattan declared Smith and his tribe to be allies, and set Smith free with 12 guides to return to Jamestown.¹⁸ Smith's time captured gained him information about the Chesapeake, which later aided him in his expeditions.

In June of 1608 Smith set off on his first voyage of the Chesapeake, with the goal to gain intel about native resources, peoples, and lands and rivers for the creation of maps.¹⁹ On this voyage Smith encountered hostile natives on more than one occasion, but was able to continuously gain the upperhand by shooting bullets near his attackers, as a show of superior technology. After these encounters Smith was able to create friendly relations with the natives by giving them trinkets, trading, and exchanging information with them.²⁰ A successful example of this is when traveling the river Patowomeck Smith was ambushed but created friendly relations with the tribe by exchanging hostages.²¹ Patowomeck guides led Smith to an ultimately

¹⁵ Smith, *The Journals of Captain John Smith*, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid, 16-17.

¹⁷ Ibid, 17-25.

¹⁸ Ibid, 2-4, 24-27.

¹⁹ Ibid, 43.

²⁰ Ibid, 55-57.

²¹ Ibid, 57.

unprofitable mine, but upon his return downriver Smith and his crew found a variety of animals prominent in the fur trade, a part of the river overflowing with fish, and Stingray Isle (where Smith was poisoned by a stingray, but recovered with the help of preservative oil).²² This voyage was ultimately successful, as Smith's goals were accomplished via his discovery of potential industry, his further-developed relationships with native tribes, and his map of the Chesapeake.

On July 24, 1608, three days after his return to Jamestown, Captain John Smith and his updated crew of twelve began their second voyage of the summer, with the goal of finding precious metals and an alternate route to China.²³ At the start of the expedition, the Kecoughtan tribe, allies of Smith, dined him and his men, where thereafter eight of Smith's twelve person crew fell ill, which left only five men able to stand and to work.²⁴ Along their journey, Smith once again communicated with the hostile tribes they encountered and procured goods such as furs, food, tobacco, bows, and arrows.²⁵ In his voyages Smith and his crew sailed the major rivers of the Chesapeake (the Susquehanna, the Potomac, and the James) leaving only the Rappahannock to explore, where they were attacked by numerous tribes, whom they either fled from or gained allyships with.²⁶ In this expedition Smith created a degree of peace with the Massawomeck, Patawomeck, Rappahannock, and Mannahoack tribes (etc.), and he even made (temporary) alliances between tribes that had been warring for years.²⁷ Captain John Smith's second voyage of the Chesapeake was ultimately semi-successful, as he gained more knowledge for his map of the Chesapeake, but experienced sickness, attacks, and loss of men.

In their explorations of North America Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Knight, and Captain John Smith both aimed to document, map, and colonize the New World, though only Smith was

²² Ibid, 48-51, 58-60.

²³ Ibid, 61-62.

²⁴ Ibid, 72.

²⁵ Ibid, 73-75.

²⁶ Ibid, 67, 78-83.

²⁷ Ibid, 67-71, 81-88.

completely successful. Sir Humphrey Gilbert's expedition had minor successes such as claim of land and documentation of the new world, but upon return to England the vast majority of Gilbert's work and his life were lost when two thirds of his fleet sank. Captain John Smith's goals of documenting the native peoples, resources, and geography of the Chesapeake were all fulfilled in his voyages, and Smith even used his knowledge of the Algonquian language to gain trust and knowledge from Native American tribes and improve his mappings.

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